

It's not uncommon to be concerned about the possibility of having a perineal tear from giving birth or about experiencing incontinence in the postpartum period. The following is information on what you can do to try to prevent either from happening and how to support your healing if needed:

Prior to labour:

- **Eat well:** nutritious food and lots of water will promote healthy tissue and support elasticity
- **Exercise regularly:** promotes circulation and healthy tissue
- **Practice pelvic floor exercises** ("Kegels" as described below) regularly

During birth:

In the pushing stage of labour, know that you can and should push as hard as you can until the head comes down far enough to stretch your external tissue. At this point, most women experience a burning sensation and it will be helpful to slow down your pushing effort. Your midwife will talk you through this stage and may suggest changing to a gravity-neutral position. Your midwife may also try using a warm or cold compress for your comfort and to support the perineum.

Promoting excellent healing:

First week

- Apply ice packs or frozen pads to the perineum within the first 48 hours.
- Use a peri-bottle during and after using the toilet. You may add perineal healing herbs or lavender or tea tree oil to your peri-wash water.
- Sitz baths twice a day after 48 hours- include 1-2 cups of Epsom salts; additionally you may add lavender or tea tree oil.
- Consider Homeopathic Arnica 30C (or 200C if you can find it) every 4 hours while awake (helps to heal swelling and bruising).
- Rest, rest, rest! Your body needs as much rest as possible to heal from your birth.
- Sit with your legs together (i.e. don't sit cross-legged) to reduce further stretching your tissue

First month:

- It is normal to feel heaviness or pressure on your pelvic floor at the end of a busy day, which is a sign of the muscles becoming fatigued. Try to balance days of activity with days of rest.
- Prolonged use of maxi-pads can be very drying. Following a sitz bath, dry your perineum well and sit on a blue-pad or towel to allow your perineum air time for 1-2 hours.
- Inform your midwife if:
 - You have increasing amounts of pain in your perineum, not associated with increased activity or decreased use of painkillers.
 - You have vaginal discharge that is foul smelling.
 - You continue to have serious urinary incontinence past the first few weeks.

First year:

- Use lots of lubrication when you have intercourse. Breastfeeding hormones will reduce your body's own ability to make vaginal lubrication
- See a pelvic floor physiotherapist if you have any concerns regarding postpartum function or incontinence or even just want to improve your pelvic floor strength. If your problem is assessed to require further medical intervention, they can provide a Gynecologist's referral.
 - BC Women's Continence Clinic 604-875-3137 (self-referral)
 - BC Women's Physiotherapy Program 604-875-2000 (self-referral, ask for the physiotherapy program extension)
 - Various private physiotherapists specialize in the pelvic floor. If you don't have one in mind, we recommend Dayan Physiotherapy at www.dayanphysio.com, at Broadway and Oak in Vancouver.

Benefits of Kegel Exercises

Kegel exercises strengthen the pelvic floor muscles, which support the uterus, bladder and bowel. The pelvic floor is a "hammock" of muscles that hold the pelvic organs in place. Some people refer to Kegel exercises as pelvic floor exercises because they treat and prevent pelvic floor weakness. During pregnancy and birth, the pelvic floor can become stretched and weakened by the weight of your uterus and your baby passing through the birth canal. A weakened pelvic floor can also allow one or more pelvic organs to sag causing incontinence or pelvic organ prolapse.

You can do Kegels discreetly just about anytime, whether you're driving in your car, sitting at your desk or relaxing on the couch. You can even do Kegel exercises when you're pregnant and right after you have given birth. An excellent time to do them is while you are sitting breastfeeding.

If you are pregnant, start doing daily Kegels right away and definitely continue them after having your baby.

Performing Kegel exercises

Kegel exercises are easy to do and can be done anywhere without anyone knowing. It takes diligence to identify your pelvic floor muscles and learn how to contract and relax them. Here are some pointers:

- **Find the right muscles** - first, as you are sitting or lying down, try to contract the muscles you would use to stop urinating. You should feel your pelvic muscles squeezing your urethra and anus, your vagina will tighten and your pelvic floor will move upwards. If your stomach or buttocks muscles tighten, you are not exercising the right muscles. Then relax your muscles and feel your pelvic floor return to the starting position. If you succeed, you've got the basic move.
- **Perfect your technique.** Once you've identified your pelvic floor muscles, empty your bladder and sit or lie down. Contract your pelvic floor muscles, hold the contraction for five seconds, then relax for five seconds. Try it four or five times in a row. Work up to keeping the muscles contracted for 10 seconds at a time, relaxing for 10 seconds each time. Repeat this exercise 10 to 15 times/session. Try to do this at least 3-4 times a day. Kegel exercises are effective when done regularly. The more you exercise, the more likely it is that the exercises will help. This is the beginner program, start with this for the first 8-12 weeks that you are doing regular Kegels.
- **Maintain your focus.** For best results, focus on tightening only your pelvic floor muscles. Be careful not to flex the muscles in your abdomen, thighs or buttocks. Avoid holding your breath. Instead, breathe freely during the exercises.

Now that you are a Kegel pro, here are some variations to add excitement to your program:

Hold'ems – 10 sets, 2½ minutes

Do a Kegel for 10 seconds. Relax for 5 seconds. Repeat nine more times. Do a few times per day.

Speed'ems – 30 sets, 1½ minutes

Do a Kegel for 1 second. Relax for 2 seconds. Repeat 29 more times. Do a few times per day.

Advanced Training: Do 2-3 times a day, for 4 weeks

Hold'ems & Speed'ems

Try using different positions to challenge your muscles: standing with feet apart, leg up on chair, squatting, etc

Crowns – 5 sets, 2½ minutes

Combination of Hold'ems and Speed'ems: start as if doing a Speed'em but don't fully relax your muscles until you have done 8 peaks. Repeat 4 more times.

Maintenance Program: Do once a day

10 Hold'ems, 30 Speed'ems and 5 Crowns.

Urge control

Do you have overactive bladder nerves?

- You experience situational urgency, such as whenever you arrive home or whenever you hear water running
- You experience urgency, but when you go to the toilet your bladder is not full [some of this is normal in pregnancy – use your judgment]

If so:

- Aim to empty your bladder before it is full to avoid teaching your bladder nerves to overreact
- Practice using calm thoughts to quiet your nerves before you go to the toilet

Stress situations

Do a Hold'em before you cough, sneeze, lift, jump or anytime you might leak urine. The more this becomes a habit, the more your muscles will eventually do it automatically.