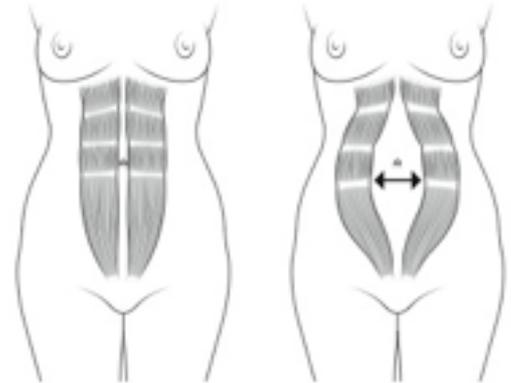


So you've had your baby and now it's time to do crunches, lots and lots of crunches, to get your abs back in shape again. Right? Well, actually no. Fitness and exercise after pregnancy is a lot more complicated than that. In fact, exercises like crunches may actually do more harm than good if you have a separation of your tummy muscles.

What is Abdominal Muscle Separation?

It's the separation of the long muscles of the abdomen via stretching or thinning of the connective tissue in the midline of the tummy (Linea Alba). It's called Diastasis Recti or Rectus Diastasis.



What causes this separation?

A combination of factors during pregnancy including hormonal changes, weight gain, abdominal muscle weakness and stretching of the muscles as your baby grows. This separation is a normal safety mechanism to prevent the muscles tearing as your baby grows. It only becomes a problem if the muscles stay separated postnatally. Stretched and separated muscles don't provide full support for your back and may increase the incidence of back pain and back injury.

Rounded posture, weak back and tummy muscles, lifting or exercising with weak muscles and poor posture can make it worse.

Symptoms you may notice

- Ongoing softness and protrusion of the abdomen.
- Visible coning or tenting of the midline of the tummy when you get out of bed or recline on the couch.
- Your pelvic floor isn't doing its job: leaking, incontinence, urge to pee.
- Feeling of weakness on the abdominal area.
- Lower back and pelvic pain.
- Pain during sex.

What can be done to help?

First step: visit a women's healthy physiotherapist for assessment and guidance. You may be advised to wear an abdominal support belt to compliment an exercise regime.

Exercises to strengthen the deep abdominal muscles.

Avoiding any exercises which increase pressure in your abdomen including sit-ups, crunches, planks, leg raises, leg bicycles, twisting, backbends.

Do not jackknife to sit up from sitting or lying. Always roll to your side first.

Minimise lifting anything heavier than your baby or anything that causes your tummy to bulge with strain.

Avoid straining on the toilet – add some psyllium husks and fruit to your cereal, eat way more vegetables and drink much more water than tea or coffee.

Check for abdominal separation

Self-check video at www.thetummyteam.com/physical-therapy/diastasis-recti/

1. Lying on your back with your knees bent place your fingertips just above your belly button.
2. Lift your head **just** off the floor (keep shoulders on the floor) and press in with your fingers feeling for the sides of your abdominal muscles, a bit like a valley with 2 ridges on either side.
3. If you can fit more than 2 fingers in sideways (which is about 2cm) then you probably have muscle separation.
4. Check just below your belly button also.
5. If you have separation, start the process of rebuilding your strength gently (as per exercises on this sheet) before you do any strong exercise or crunches.

Exercises to strengthen the deep abdominal muscles

<https://www.pelvicexercises.com.au/diastasis-recti-exercises/>

Lie on your back, low pillow under head, knees bent, knees and feet hip width apart. Relax shoulders down away from ears. With spine in a neutral position you should have a slight arch/curve away from the floor in your lower back i.e. don't push lower back flat into floor. Breathe gently for a short while to relax. This is your starting position.

Locate the deep tummy muscles

Place hand over lower tummy (below navel and above pubic bone). Gently draw tummy toward spine as if you're trying to tighten a belt. Hold and breathe for a few seconds, then gently release. Repeat and build up to a hold of about 10 seconds each time.

You can try this exercise lying on your side too.



Bent knee fallouts

Starting position lying on back with knees bent as above. Activate tummy muscles as above, hold and gently lower your right knee toward the floor, just until your pelvis starts to tilt – then you've gone too far. Left knee stays pointing toward ceiling. Keep tummy muscles activated as you draw your knee back to centre. Rest, activate tummy muscles and repeat a few times. Then try the other side.



Heel slides

From starting position, activate tummy and slowly slide one foot along floor until almost straight or before you feel your lower back arching, then slowly return to starting position. Repeat.



Extra important points

- * Support belt or SPC Recovery Shorts: You can order these online but it's ideal to be diagnosed and fitted by a specialist physiotherapist who can order these for you.
- * Always brace tummy and pelvic floor when you bend, lift, twist, get up, sit or lie down, roll over in bed.
- * In yoga or pilates: no twists, back bends, abdominal crunches or oblique crunches.
- * Always roll to your side when getting in or out of bed or off the floor.

Pelvic floor exercises are essential for your recovery

Check with your physiotherapist or pilates or yoga teacher that you're doing them correctly. We recommend ultrasound by a women's health physiotherapist to see and feel the right movement. At least once each day aim for:

- 3 sets of 5 slow contractions, holding for a count of 5. Contract on the exhale.

For diagnosis/treatment visit a women's health physiotherapist. We recommend:

Alice Mackenzie, Alchemy in Motion, Noosa Junction 5441 4764

Rebecca Steele, Hinteractive Physio, Cooroy 5442 5556

Helen Swift, Noosa Sports & Spinal Physiotherapy, Noosaville 5449 0024

Abdominal Rehab Programs

There are a number of online programs to support your recovery.

birthandbodyphysio.com (Brisbane)

mutusystem.com

nataliehodson.com

thetummyteam.com

pelvicexercises.com.au/diastasis-recti-exercises/



Karen Shlegeris
Grad. Dip. Childbirth Education
www.fitforbirth.com.au