

Pelvic Floor

The Importance of the Pelvic Floor

The pelvic floor is a band of muscles that run in a figure of eight around the anus and the vagina, right at the base of the pelvis. They act as a cup for the uterus (and the bladder and the rectum), holding everything in place much like a trampoline when stretched taut.

The reason they are the focus of attention in pregnancy is two fold- firstly because they are **under a lot of pressure** throughout pregnancy with the ever-increasing weight of the baby, placenta and amniotic fluid. So toning of the pelvic floor muscles is essential so they can take the strain of this extra weight. But they also play a very **important role in labour**, in particular the second stage. Most midwives, when they tell you to do your pelvic floor exercises will use the prospect of 'peeing every time you sneeze' or urinary incontinence as one of the perils of failure to do pelvic floor exercises – yet often this is not motivation enough to remember. More compelling perhaps is the prospect of shortening your second stage by having muscles that you are in some control of. A recent study in the British Medical Journal found that women who did regular pelvic floor exercises were **less likely to have a prolonged second stage**. A truly physiological second stage will not require overt pushing but will happen almost spontaneously, though the ability to 'let go' of the pelvic floor will help this process, even in a truly physiological birth.

(Note that there is an argument to say that extremely strong pelvic floor muscles, akin to those found in avid horse-riders can be an impediment to labouring easily during the second stage.....] would argue that there is an element, as always, of balance whereby we need strong but not excessively tight pelvic floor muscles. For most of us, that means doing the exercises as regularly as prescribed by physiotherapists and midwives)

As well as **supporting the uterus**, the pelvic floor muscles **act as 'steps'** that the baby's head revolves on, so toned muscles will help the baby get into and remain in the optimal foetal position and more significantly will help in the rotation of the baby's head and will therefore aid the spiralling descent of the baby through the pelvic canal.

How to find the pelvic floor muscles

Imagine trying to stop a pee mid-flow (even practice doing it once or twice- but don't make a habit of it, and be sure not to do your exercises this way). The muscles that you contract in order to do this are your pelvic floor muscles. Their discovery is a little bit of a chicken and an egg situation whereby they are easier to locate the more you work on them.

The Benefits of Yoga

Good posture releases pressure off the pelvic floor, so lengthening and straightening the spine is of great benefit, reducing the tendency for the pelvic floor to 'sag' beneath the weight of the baby and the uterus and the rest of its contents. We can practice specific postures to improve our posture in yoga,

but a regular yoga practice will ensure that **better posture** becomes second nature.

During pregnancy, the traditional use of 'energy locks' or bandhas as they are known in Sanskrit is not advised as one of the bandhas is specific to the abdominal muscles and so should be avoided. However, the use of the pelvic floor lock in conjunction with the breath and postures can help to tone the muscles without the need for more specific exercises. This should only be relied upon by those experienced with yoga.

Pelvic Floor Exercises

The advice from most physiotherapists is 'little and often'. Sets of ten exercises five times daily is what you should be doing in an ideal world. Alternate between contracting and holding the pelvic floor muscles, and quick contracting and releasing exercises. Luckily the exercises can be done almost anywhere and at anytime- and unless you are screwing up your face or holding your breath, no one should know you are doing it!!!

The more difficult part is remembering. I found **post-it notes** stuck in strategic places like the bathroom mirror and the fridge a useful prompt, but others advise getting into the habit of doing them whenever you stop at lights, before and after a meal – whatever you find that suits. And the exercises don't or shouldn't stop after birth, when breastfeeding can be a useful prompt. Don't be at all alarmed if after the birth you can barely feel your pelvic floor muscles. With regular exercises their tone will return surprisingly quickly.