

# Separation of the abdominal muscles during pregnancy

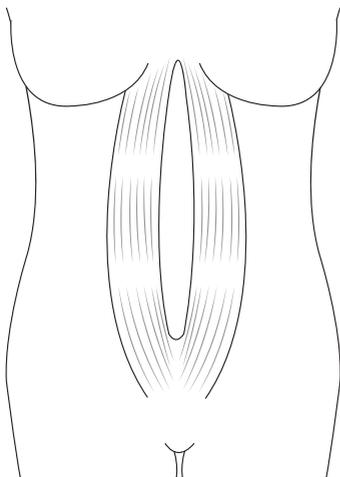


You may have already noticed that, during pregnancy your tummy (abdominal) muscles sometimes developed a 'bulging' ridge while you were straining them, for example when:

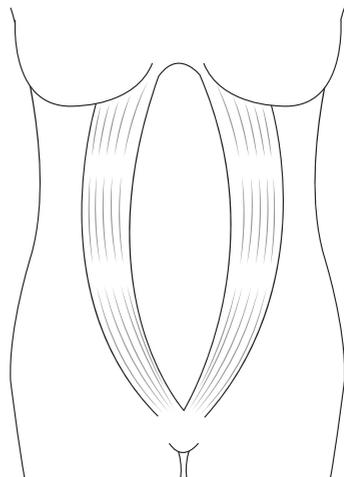
- getting out of the bath
- sitting up from lying flat in bed.

### **Why do the muscles separate?**

The two vertical abdominal muscles are normally joined together by a thick band of fibrous tissue. This tissue softens and stretches during pregnancy to allow for the increasing size of the baby. This causes the muscles to separate. This is not dangerous.



Before pregnancy



During pregnancy

### **What do the abdominal muscles do?**

They:

- hold your abdominal organs in place
- support your back

It is therefore important to bring the muscles back together again after the baby is born.

## **How can I encourage the muscles to go back to normal?**

After the birth of your baby the abdominal muscles will be stretched and slack at first. However, you can encourage them to return to their former shape and strength by doing simple exercises.

If you notice the 'bulge' very soon after the birth, start gently exercising these abdominal muscles.

1. Check that you are not holding your breath while you do them.
2. Frequently tighten and pull them in as much as possible throughout daily activity.
3. Remember to take a rest if necessary.

It is also important to continue to avoid actions which encourage these muscles to separate.

Don't:

- get straight up from lying flat
- do any movements that involve extreme twisting or sideways bending of your body.

## **Can I measure the separation myself?**

Yes. You can feel the gap between the two muscles when they are made to work strongly:

4. Lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet flat on the bed or floor. Press the fingers of one hand firmly just below your tummy button.
5. Pull in your tummy muscles and slowly raise your head and shoulders as if trying to sit up. At the same time reach out towards your knees with the other hand.

Result: You should feel the two bands of muscles tighten and pull towards the mid-line, as if pushing your fingers out of the way.

Estimate: How many fingers remain in the gap? If more than two, start the following exercises and postpone any other exercises until you have reduced the gap.

## What exercises must I do to reduce the separation?

### Tummy flattener

1. Lying flat with knees bent and feet flat on the bed. Breathe in. Breathe out. Pull in lower abdomen towards your spine. Hold for 10 seconds, continuing to breathe normally.
2. Lying flat with knees bent and feet flat on the bed:
  - pull in your tummy muscles as much as possible
  - tilt your pelvis up towards you by flattening the hollow at the base of your spine down onto the bed, and at the same time tighten the muscles in your bottom. Don't raise your bottom right off the bed.
  - hold this position for 3-5 seconds and then relax. Keep breathing easily throughout the exercise.
3. Lying on your side with knees bent together:
  - pull in your tummy muscles as much as possible
  - tighten the muscles in your bottom and tuck them underneath you so that your pelvis tilts upwards towards you while still lying on your side. Your knees and shoulders should not move
  - hold for 3-5 seconds and then relax. Don't hold your breath while doing this.

Repeat each exercise 5 times at first and at least 5-6 times daily. Aim to gradually increase the number and frequency of these exercises each day. Postpone any other exercises until later.

When your tummy flattener exercise becomes easy, make it more difficult as follows.

### More difficult tummy flattening exercises

(When separation of muscles is still more than 2 fingers width)

1. Lying flat with your knees bent and feet flat on the bed:
  - cross your hands over at the level of your waist so that they lie just beyond the outer edge of each muscle
  - as you breathe out, slowly raise your head while firmly pulling together the two underlying muscles (as if trying to prevent the bulge)

- return slowly to lying flat
  - when the muscles are stronger, lift both head and shoulders.
2. Standing against a wall. Try to have the back of your shoulders and your buttocks touching the wall and your knees very slightly bent:
- pull in your tummy muscles as much as possible
  - check the position of your head against the wall; think tall - tuck your chin in and hold your head high
  - try to flatten the hollow in your lower back against the wall, so that your pelvis tilts upwards towards you
  - hold for 3-5 seconds and then relax.

When the gap has reduced to 2 fingers width, go on to do the exercises described in the post-natal exercise leaflet.

**Warning: DO NOT attempt to do 'sit-ups' or 'double leg lifts' at any time. These two exercises could injure your back and put too much strain on your internal organs and pelvic floor muscles.**

If you would like this leaflet in large print, braille, audio version or in another language, please contact the General Office on 01872 252690

