

Advice and exercises to improve separated abdominal muscles after pregnancy

Pelvic Health Physiotherapy

Information for Patients

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Introduction

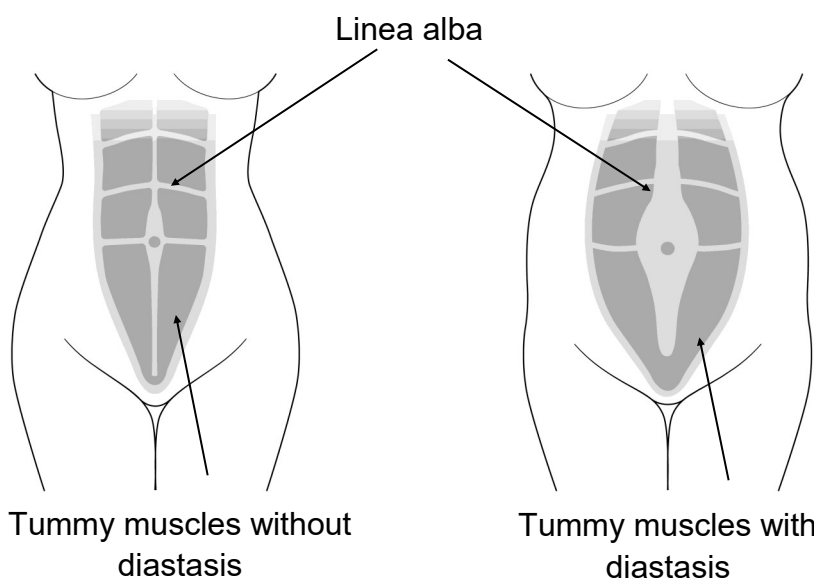
During pregnancy, the tummy (abdominal) muscles must stretch to make room for the growing baby. This causes them to lengthen and weaken.

The top layer of tummy muscles under the skin (6 pack) are known as the **rectus abdominis**.

The tummy muscles are connected in the middle by a seam-like band known as the linea alba. The linea alba softens during pregnancy due to the increase in pregnancy hormones. When these muscles and the linea alba stretch too much, and the muscles separate, it is called diastasis recti or diastasis rectus abdominis (DRA).

Often this will get better naturally within a few weeks after the birth of your baby. Sometimes the tummy muscles do not get better straight away and you will need help from a physiotherapist to teach you exercises.

This leaflet will give you some basic information and advice on how to manage your condition.



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Why do people get diastasis rectus abdominis (DRA)?

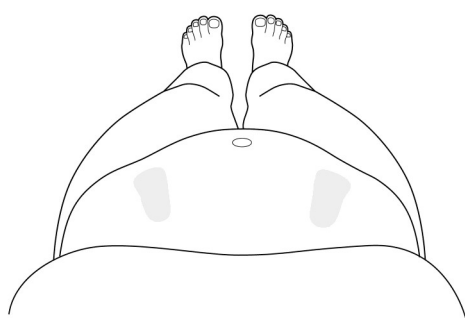
- Weak abdominal muscles before pregnancy
- Multiple pregnancies, for example, twins, triplets or more.
- Being overweight
- Large babies
- Extra fluid in the womb (amniotic fluid)
- Pregnancies that are too close together

How do I know if I have diastasis rectus abdominis (DRA)?

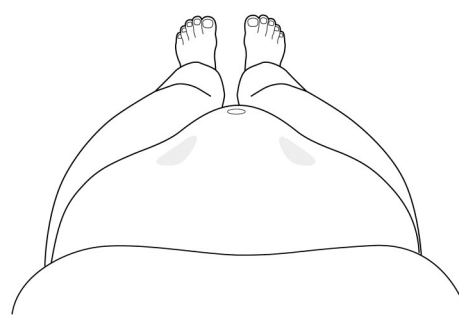
You may notice a bulge down the middle of your tummy when you sit up from a lying position, or lift your legs up when getting on or off the bed. This is known as “doming”.

Checking for separation of the recti muscles can be done either by yourself, a midwife or a physiotherapist. Sometimes people may naturally have a small separation of these muscles, which may not cause them a problem.

However if this separation has got worse since being pregnant and there is a vertical “dome” pushing through tummy muscles then this may lead to further problems such as back pain, tummy pain, and in some cases, a hernia. A hernia is a condition where part of the organs in the tummy bulge through a weak spot, causing a lump.



A) Normal tummy
without doming



B) Tummy “doming”. Notice the
extra “dome” running down the
midline

Diagram of tummy, as viewed by the patient looking towards the feet

To check for a separation of your tummy muscles yourself, follow the simple steps on the next page:

How can I tell if I have separated tummy muscles (diastasis rectus)?

1. Lie on your back with your knees bent and the soles of your feet flat on the floor or bed.
2. Place one hand across your tummy, just above your tummy button.
3. Keep your tummy relaxed and gently press your fingers in to your tummy.
4. Lift your head and shoulders up towards your knees. Feel across your midline with your fingers for the right and left edges of your “6-pack” muscle. You may be able to feel a small amount of separation above and below your tummy button.

How can I stop things from getting worse?

- **Avoid heavy lifting and strenuous housework where possible.** If you have no choice, make sure you keep your back straight, bend your knees and hold the load close to your body. Allow your legs to do the work, and draw in your tummy muscles.
- Never hold your breath whilst lifting.
- **Do not** do double leg raises or sit-ups.
- **Avoid** becoming constipated or straining to empty your bowels.

Moving your exercises onto the next level

Your physiotherapist will tell you when you are ready to progress your exercises, to ensure that it is safe to do so. You may also be given some other exercises which are not covered in this booklet.

The exercises in this booklet, and any other exercises your physiotherapist has given you, are designed to help your tummy muscles recover following the birth of your baby, which may take a few months.

If you experience pain whilst doing these exercises, or afterwards, please tell your physiotherapist.

Getting in and out of bed

When getting out of bed, bend both of your knees and roll onto your side. Allowing your feet to slide over the edge of the mattress, push up onto your elbow, using your hand from the opposite side to help you sit upright.

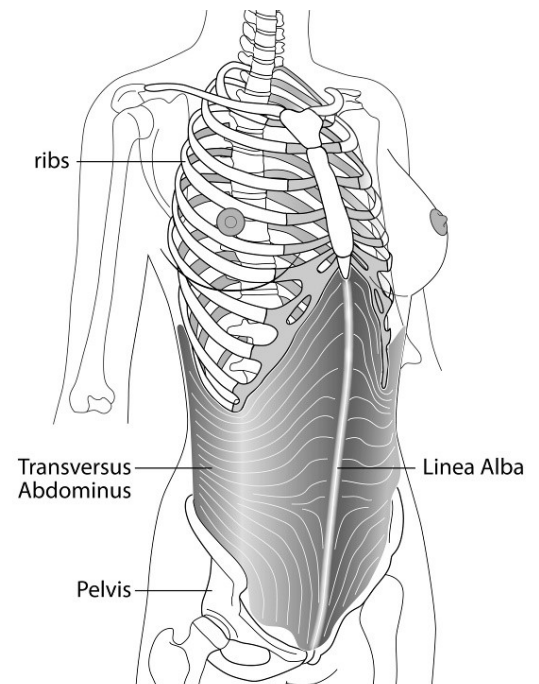
When getting into bed, reverse the process of getting out of bed which is shown below: sit on the edge of the bed and drop your shoulder to the pillow. Lift both ankles up onto the bed. Then, keeping your knees and hips in a line, roll from your side on to your back, and reposition yourself for comfort.



Exercises for the deep tummy muscles

Your physiotherapist will teach you these exercises. They are designed to strengthen the deep tummy muscle known as **transversus abdominis**. These muscles act like a corset. Once you have good control of these, you can begin to strengthen the other tummy muscles.

It is important that you follow your physiotherapist's instructions so that you do not make the problem worse. Do not try to do harder exercises until your physiotherapist tells you to.



Working the deep tummy muscles (Transversus Abdominis (TrA))

Start date:

- Lie on the bed or floor
- Bend your knees
- Breathe normally throughout
- Place your thumbs on the inside of your pelvic bones, as shown in the picture below.
- Gently draw-in the muscles in the lower part of your tummy, as if to flatten it - you should be able to feel the muscles tighten under your thumbs
- Hold for up to 10 seconds, continuing to breathe normally
- Relax your tummy
- Repeat 8 to 10 times



Tips:

Practise trying to tighten this muscle in a variety of positions, such as sitting upright or standing.

Once you are able to control these deep tummy muscles, it is important to practice tightening them at the same time as doing the following exercises...

Exercises for the rectus abdominis

Whilst doing these exercises, remember to engage your deep tummy muscles to stop any bulging of your tummy.

1. Pelvic Tilt Exercise:

- Lie on your back with your knees bent up and a pillow under your head for comfort. Do not hold your breath
- Draw in your deep tummy muscles. Flatten the arch of your back into the bed and curl your pelvis under as you do so.
- Continue to breathe normally. Hold for up to 10 seconds and then relax
- Repeat 8 to 10 times

2. Pelvic Tilt with Head Lift:

- Do the pelvic tilt as described above
- Keep this position and gently bring your chin towards your chest
- Keep your shoulders and shoulder blades on the floor and remember to breathe normally
- Hold for up to 10 seconds and then relax
- Repeat 8 to 10 times



3. Pelvic Tilt/Head & Shoulder Lift:- Start Date:

- Perform the pelvic tilt with head lift (exercise 2)
- Keep this position and gently lift your shoulders slightly off the bed
- Hold for up to 10 seconds and then relax
- Repeat 8 to 10 times. Remember to breathe and not hold your breath



Tips...

Depending on how much separation there is between your muscles, you may need to do the above exercises in a more upright position, as shown below.



More information:

Pelvic Obstetric and Gynaecological Physiotherapy (POGP) thepogp.co.uk/

Contact details:

Physiotherapy Department: 0116 258 4073 or 0116 258 5816 Monday to Friday 08.30am to 4.30pm .

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Previous reference:

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