



When you are pregnant, you get a lot of advice from many people. One issue that few people think about are signs of bladder and bowel control problems in pregnancy and after the birth.

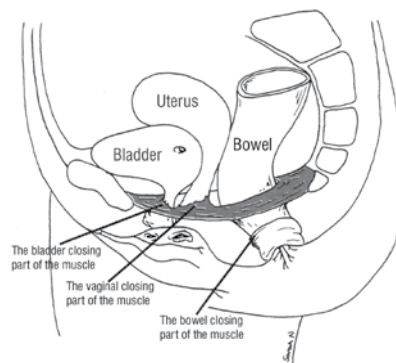
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## WHAT DO MY PELVIC FLOOR MUSCLES DO?

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See the picture of the pelvic floor. The pelvic floor muscles do a number of things. They:

- help to close off the bladder, the vagina (front passage) and the rectum (back passage); and
- help to hold the bladder, the uterus (womb) and bowel in their proper place.



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## HOW DO I KNOW IF I HAVE A PROBLEM?

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There are a few things that might happen if you have weak pelvic floor muscles. You might:

- leak urine when you cough, sneeze, lift, laugh or do exercise;
- not be able to control passing wind;
- feel an urgent need to empty your bladder or your bowel;
- leak bowel motion after you have been to the toilet;
- have trouble cleaning yourself after a bowel motion;
- find it hard to pass a bowel motion unless you change position or use your fingers to help; or
- feel a lump in your vagina or a feeling of dragging like a period, mostly at the end of the day, which could mean that one or more of your pelvic organs might be sagging down into your vagina. This is called pelvic organ prolapse. Prolapse is very common and happens to about one in ten women in Australia.

# 11 EXPECTING A BABY?

You may also have sexual problems. Just after your baby is born, you will be very tired and busy with your baby. Vaginal birth can cause weakness around the vagina or a lack of feeling. Vaginal tears and trauma can cause pain for many months. While breast feeding, oestrogen levels may be low and so the vagina may be dry, which can cause more problems. It may be helpful for you and your partner to talk about these issues with a health professional.

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## HOW CAN I TELL IF I MIGHT GET BLADDER AND BOWEL PROBLEMS?

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Some women seem more likely to have bladder and bowel problems, even if they have had quite easy birth. We can't yet tell who these women might be.

Women who already have bladder or bowel symptoms, such as irritable bowel syndrome or an urgent need to pass urine (also called overactive bladder) will be more likely to have this problem worsen or to gain new problems. Constipation, coughing and obesity can also make problems worse.

Certain things about the birth can make a woman more likely to have bladder and bowel problems:

- having your first baby;
- having a large baby;
- having a long labour, chiefly the second stage of labour; or
- a difficult vaginal delivery, when you have stitches after being cut or having a big tear just outside or in your vagina when the baby is helped out by the vacuum cap or the doctor uses forceps.

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## WHAT IF I HAVE A CAESAREAN BIRTH?

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Choosing a caesarean birth might seem like a way to avoid these problems, but it is not that simple. A caesarean birth might reduce the risk of severe bladder control problems from 10% to 5% for a first baby, but after the third caesarean there may be no benefit at all. And caesarean births carry their own risks. Babies born this way are more likely to have breathing problems at birth. It can be more risky for the mother and scarring from caesarean births can make pelvic surgery more difficult in the future. So you may be trading one problem for another.

In many cases, a vaginal birth runs just as planned and is a lovely event for parents, so this type of birth is best when possible. But problems can still happen. Research is now looking at how we can better know about and stop harm to the pelvic floor during birth. For now, pregnancy and birth involves making a choice between different kinds of risk. You and your partner need to think about these risks and discuss them with your pregnancy care professional. No one can promise you and your baby a perfect outcome.



## WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT WEAK PELVIC FLOOR MUSCLES?

The birth of a baby might have stretched your pelvic floor muscles. Any 'pushing down' action in the first weeks after the baby's birth might stretch the pelvic floor again. You can help to protect your pelvic floor muscles by not pushing down on your pelvic floor. Here are a few ideas to help you.

- Try to squeeze, lift and hold your pelvic floor muscles before you sneeze, cough, blow your nose or lift.
- Cross your legs and squeeze them tightly together before each cough or sneeze.
- Share the lifting of heavy loads.
- Don't do bouncing exercises.
- Do pelvic floor muscle training to strengthen your pelvic floor muscles (See the leaflet "Pelvic Floor Muscle Training for Women").
- Keep good bladder and bowel habits:
  1. eat fruit and vegetables;
  2. drink 6 to 8 glasses of water a day;
  3. do not go to the toilet 'just in case' as this might cut down how much your bladder can hold; and
  4. make sure your bladder is empty after going to the toilet.
- Try not to get constipated.
- Don't strain when opening your bowels. A good way to sit on the toilet is to put your forearms onto your thighs and, with your feet close to the toilet, raise your heels. Relax your pelvic floor muscles and gently push.
- Keep your weight within the right range for your height and age, and try not to gain too much during pregnancy.
- Continue to exercise.
- Ask for advice about bladder infections.

For more information, see the leaflet "Good Bladder Habits for Everyone."



# 11 EXPECTING A BABY?

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## WILL THINGS GET BETTER?

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Do not lose heart. Even very poor bladder or bowel control just after giving birth can get better without help in the first six months, as the pelvic floor tissues, muscles and nerves mend.

Regular pelvic floor muscle training kept up over the long term, as well as the right advice, will help.

Don't forget to look after yourself at a time when it is easy to neglect your own needs.

If things are not getting better after six months, speak to your doctor, physiotherapist, or continence nurse advisor.

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## SEEK HELP

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It is best to ask for help if you are worried about any bladder or bowel issue.

Call Expert Advisors on the National Continence Helpline for free:

- information;
- advice; and
- leaflets.

On FREECALL 1800 33 00 66 (8 am to 8 pm Monday to Friday), or

Visit the website: [www.bladderbowel.gov.au](http://www.bladderbowel.gov.au)

The Helpline can arrange for an interpreter through the Telephone Interpreter Service (TIS). Please ring 13 14 50 Monday to Friday and ask for the Helpline.

**Some pregnant women can have bladder and bowel control problems. You can get help.**

\* Calls from mobile telephones are charged at applicable rates.

