

Abdominal Exercises and Pelvic Floor Dysfunction

Abdominal exercises to avoid with prolapse and after prolapse surgery include a variety of exercises common place in gyms and exercise classes. Women at risk of pelvic floor dysfunction including women with pelvic prolapse need to be informed about how to avoid straining the floor with the wrong kind of abdominal exercises.

This expert physiotherapist article teaches:

- 12 unsafe abdominal exercises to avoid with pelvic prolapse and after prolapse surgery.
- How to identify unsafe abdominal exercises if you have pelvic floor dysfunction
- 3 myths every woman needs to know about abdominal strength exercises.

12 abdominal exercises to avoid with vaginal prolapse and after prolapse surgery

Intense core abdominal exercises involving the upper abdominal "six pack" muscles increase downward pressure on the pelvic floor. Recent studies using real time ultrasound to watch the effect of exercise on the pelvic floor confirm that when women with pelvic floor dysfunction perform sit-up exercises, the pelvic floor is forced downwards. If repeated frequently or very intense, core abdominal muscle exercises such as sit ups can thereby stretch, strain and overload the pelvic floor and potentially worsen prolapse symptoms. It is vital to avoid overloading the pelvic floor after prolapse, incontinence and/or hysterectomy surgery.

The following abdominal exercises will increase downward pressure upon the pelvic floor. These exercises should be avoided or modified by women who are at risk of pelvic floor dysfunction to minimize the risk of pelvic floor strain and injury.

1. Traditional abdominal crunch/curl or sit-up exercises
2. Incline sit-ups Abdominal curl machines
3. Oblique sit-ups
4. Oblique machine
5. Fit ball sit-ups
6. Fit ball between-leg lifts (above)
7. Bicycle legs
8. Double leg raise
9. Hanging knee raise
10. Pilates "Table Top" exercise
11. Intense core exercises such as "Plank" or "Hover"

How to identify unsafe abdominal exercises?

Try to avoid any abdominal exercises that involve raising both legs off the ground at once and/or exercises involving raising your head and shoulders off the ground whilst lying down on your back. Both these types of exercises will increase the downward force on pelvic prolapse and the pelvic floor. These exercises require very good pelvic floor strength and function to counteract the downward pressure associated with them.

For information on pelvic floor safe abdominal core exercises refer to Inside Out by Pelvic Floor Physiotherapist Michelle Kenway and Urogynaecologist Dr Judith Goh.



3 Abdominal core strength exercise myths

Exercise myth 1- Abdominal exercises will flatten the appearance of my stomach

Unfortunately our society has a culture of abdominal strengthening. Women are often led to believe that the more abdominal muscle exercises they perform, the flatter their stomach will appear! We know that it is not possible to spot reduce fat - to flatten your stomach you probably need to lose fat. It does not matter how many sit-up or abdominal strength exercises you do, they will never flatten your stomach. The way to flatten the appearance of your stomach is to lose body weight by reducing your fat intake and increasing appropriate exercise.

Exercise myth 2- Pilates exercises will strengthen my pelvic floor

In some cases women mistakenly believe that doing abdominal exercises including Pilates exercises will strengthen their pelvic floor. Abdominal strength exercises or intense core exercises will not strengthen the pelvic floor if the pelvic floor is weak and not working well. The more intense core abdominal exercises women perform, the more downward pressure they place on their pelvic floor. Some women actually develop pelvic floor dysfunction as a direct result of intense core strength exercises.

Pilates exercises and classes can be problematic for women who have had previous hysterectomy, prolapse surgery and/or incontinence surgery in the past. Women with or at risk of pelvic floor dysfunction should be screened prior to attending Pilates sessions and their Pilates exercises modified accordingly if the risk of pelvic floor dysfunction exists. Women having undergone recent prolapse surgery or hysterectomy need to understand that mainstream Pilates is not an appropriate form of rehabilitation exercise when recovering.

Exercise myth 3- Abdominal muscles should be strongly braced at all times

Advice to brace the abdominal muscles strongly is not inappropriate for women with pelvic floor dysfunction. Constantly bracing the abdominal muscles increases the downward pressure on the pelvic floor. The deep abdominal core muscles are designed to work gently all the time and this is how they should be exercised.

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