

Diastasis recti - separated stomach muscles - in pregnancy and postnatally

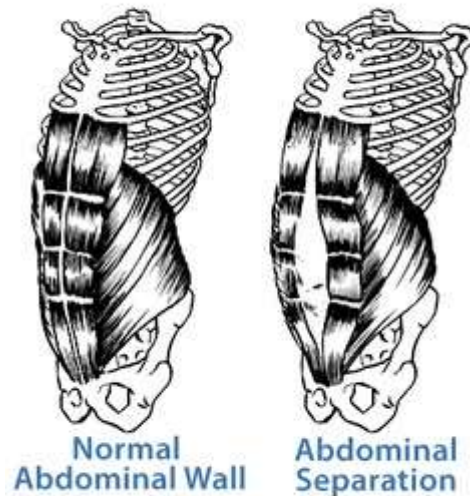
I think it's useful first to know a little more about all the stomach muscles first.

- **The Transverse Abdominals (TVA)** – the deepest of the abdominal muscles, they have a huge effect on our core strength
- **The Internal and External Obliques** – two pairs of muscles on either side of the torso, involved in rotation and lateral flexion, which also play a role in body posture, the externals less so than the internals due to their more superficial position.
- **Rectus Abdominis** – the most superficial of all the abdominal muscles, they are a pair of parallel muscles running vertically up the stomach, separated by a midline of connective tissue called the linea alba. They extend right from the pubic bone to the bottom of the ribs. Development of these muscles has led to them being referred to as the 6 pack!

What is Diastasis Recti?

It refers to the partial or complete thinning and widening of the rectus abdominis muscles as the linea alba is stretched beyond its natural limits and so separates along the midline. The muscles are not tearing or rupturing so there is no or little pain.

These muscles are usually kept in line by the deep TVA and oblique muscles but in pregnancy as the abdominal wall is stretched continuously, they can find it hard to do their job. Diastasis recti can occur especially during periods of rapid growth; in multiple pregnancies; and in women who have particularly weak abdominal muscles. If it's going to happen, it usually occurs in the second or third trimester, although it can happen during labour and delivery.



HOW CAN YOU TELL IF YOUR STOMACH MUSCLES ARE SPLIT...

...in pregnancy?

In pregnancy, you may feel the moment when your rectus abdominis muscles split apart, maybe when you move in a particular way. Sometimes they split from the top, sometimes from the bottom, sometimes all the way, and sometimes just in one place, often over the belly button. Sometimes you can see a ridge running down part or all of the middle of the belly area, which gets worse on exertion (so for example, when you lie on your back and lift your head and shoulders off the floor). In later pregnancy, the top of the uterus can sometimes be seen bulging out of the abdominal wall. Your midwife should be able to palpate and feel if yours have split, so do ask her to check if you are unsure or would like

reassurance. It happens in around one third of pregnancies, and it is thought there may be some genetic link, but remember, yours may not split at all, many don't!

...postnatally?

Postnatally, you can check if your muscles have split by lying on your back with your knees bent, feet flat on the floor. Place three fingers of one hand on your tummy button, palm facing you. Lift your head and shoulders so that you are contracting the stomach muscles to hold you in place. Push in with your fingers and see how many fingers you can fit between the two walls of muscles. Try moving your hand further up and further down, to see the extent of the split. Two and a half fingers or less is considered normal after pregnancy. Any more than two fingers is considered a split rectis muscle, especially if the split does not shrink on tightening the muscles further or if there is a small mound protruding at your midline. NB If you have had a C-section, don't do this test until your incision site has healed, around 6-10 weeks post-partum.

Other signs of split rectis muscles are that your tummy button has become an 'outie' and also that you can see a bulge in your stomach on exertion (e.g. when coughing).

Why is it a problem?

If the rectus abdominis split apart, they are unable to exert the same level of support to the trunk of your body and this can most commonly cause 'pot belly', back pain, sacro-iliac pain, hip pain and pelvic floor problems. In worst cases, you could suffer from hernias and prolapses. It is definitely worth taking care in pregnancy and doing careful exercises to heal them postnatally.

Much of the time, this condition spontaneously rectifies itself post delivery within 6 months. However, some people say the muscles are unlikely to reattach on their own and they may actually continue to separate after birth. Be positive and assume that with a little care and attention, you can rectify the situation!

Before you do any abdominal exercises, you should consult with a physical therapist to find out just what's going on with your abdominal muscles.

Remember, the benefits of closing a diastasis are:

- a flatter and more toned tummy
- a smaller waist
- a stronger core
- strong muscular protection and support for your internal organs
- improved pelvic floor strength
- strong muscular support for your back and spine, &
- can help relieve any back problems you are experiencing.

How to look after stomach muscles in pregnancy

You can follow this advice if you know you have split rectus muscles or if you are keen to prevent it happening

- Don't jack knife up and down when getting in and out of bed. Instead, roll to the side and push yourself up to sitting with your arms.
- Don't do big twists, especially not with your arm extended out to the side if your muscles are already split.
- Consider wearing a maternity belly support brace can reduce the strain on the abdominal muscles by more evenly distributing the weight of your bump as well as reducing the downward drag.
- Maintain your weight gain to the normal ranges for your stages of pregnancy. This will hopefully result in a more gradual growth of your belly enabling the linea alba to stretch.
- Consider wearing a maternity lumbar support brace if you are required to do heavy or repetitive lifting. Ideally don't do such lifting!

How to heal your split tummy muscles postnatally

Remember to get advice from your doctor who can refer you to a physiotherapist. Continue to do follow the above advice until your muscles have come back together (and there is no bulging with coughing, sneezing or sit up like movements.)

Exercises to avoid ...

- Sit ups (also, don't 'jack knife up and down when getting in and out of bed, instead, roll over onto your side to get up and down)
- Straight leg raises
- Trunk rotations, such as criss-cross sit ups which target the oblique muscles, as they can strain the abdominals excessively.
- Consider getting some hands on treatment from a physical therapist such as a physiotherapist, osteopath, chiropractor, myotherapist or acupuncturist. Treatment can assist in realigning your body and taking pressure off the abdominal muscles.

Try working your way through these five exercises (taken courtesy of Catherine Cram at babyfit.com) and mastering each one before moving on to the next. (NB wait till any c-section scar is healed and there is no pain on exertion, and any vaginal tears or cuts are healed).

1. **Belly button to spine:** When sitting, simply pull your belly button in towards your spine, without flattening your back (i.e. no pelvic tilting). Hold for a count of five (keep breathing!) then release. Try to work up to 5-10 contraction, a few times each day. With practice, you will be able to do this standing, walking etc.
2. **Basic breath:** Lie on your back with your arms at your sides, knees bent, feet resting on the floor. Inhale and exhale a few times. Don't flatten your back or tilt your pelvis, just let the natural curve in your back remain. Breathe in slowly and deeply. Now, breathe out and tighten your tummy muscles, pulling your navel towards your spine.

Remember to concentrate on contracting the muscles below your belly button without flattening your back. When you are able to contract and relax your abdominal muscles without moving your back, you have learned to properly isolate the correct muscles. You can then try the following exercises.

3. **Knee straighteners:** Lie on the floor with knees bent and arms at your side. Hold your tummy in by doing your basic breath contraction. Keeping one knee bent, slowly slide the opposite leg out until it is straight with the floor, and then slide it back up to bent knee position. Relax your tummy.

Repeat with the other leg. Remember not to flatten your back and to keep the curve of your spine relaxed. When your abdominal muscles are contracted it helps to stabilize your pelvis while your legs and lower tummy muscles work. This prevents strain in your back muscles, and trains your abdominal muscles to protect and support your spine. When you can comfortably do 20 legs slides on each side you are ready to move on to the next exercise.

4. **Knee raises part 1:** Lie on floor with knees bent, feet on floor, and arms at your side. Pull in on your tummy and hold, then raise one knee towards your chest and slowly straighten it out parallel to the floor—about 2-3 inches above the floor without touching it. Return extended leg to starting position, knees bent, feet resting on floor, tummy relaxed.

Repeat on opposite side, keeping one knee bent as you extend the other leg. Work up to five repetitions on each side without stopping, building to 20 repetitions or more on each side before moving on to the next exercise

Knee raises part 2: Hold your tummy in by doing your basic breath contraction as you bring both legs up into your chest, knees bent. Slowly extend one leg out, parallel with the floor but not touching it. Return the leg to the starting position and repeat with opposite leg. Work up to 10 repetitions each leg.

With each repetition remember to keep breathing, contract your tummy as you move, and don't let your back pop up. If the arch in your back keeps popping up during the exercise, then you're not strong enough to progress to this level, and need to go back to the previous exercise until you build greater strength. When you can repeat this exercise 20 times on each leg without discomfort or arching your back, move on to the next exercise.

5. **Single leg lowers:** Bring both legs to your chest one at a time. Straighten both legs up in the air, at a 90-degree angle from your hips. Keeping your legs together, slowly lower one leg down toward the floor. Raise it back again. Repeat on other side. Only lower your legs as far as you feel comfortable doing so.

If you feel your back beginning to arch, bring your leg back up and lower again only as far as you can without arching the back. Work up to 20 repetitions. If you notice back pain with this exercise, discontinue and repeat the previous practices until you are stronger.