

## INFORMATION SHEET 20: CHILDBIRTH AND THE PELVIC FLOOR

### Does childbearing weaken the pelvic floor?

Over half of pregnant women report symptoms of urinary incontinence and most studies have found that women who have had children are more likely to suffer from urinary incontinence than women who have never had children (Rortveit, Grodstin). For many women the symptoms that are experienced in the months after birth do diminish naturally. However, in a recent large Swedish study, over 1 in 5 women reported symptoms of stress incontinence a year after having a baby (Schytt) and for many they persist for life, worsening with age. Some studies suggest that stress incontinence symptoms that appear after the birth, rather than during the pregnancy, are much more likely to persist, with 25% of these women still incontinent one year later.

### Can a caesarean birth reduce the likelihood of pelvic floor damage?

Some research does indicate that women who have had caesarean deliveries have a lower rate of incontinence than women who have had vaginal deliveries (Rortveit, Farrell). Several studies have found that a forceps delivery increase a woman's chance of suffering from incontinence after giving birth.

### Does pelvic floor exercising after having a baby make a difference?

Research shows that a regular program of pelvic floor exercise does make a difference; it reduces the likelihood of ongoing stress incontinence and increases muscle strength, with results of an eight-week program still sustained a year later :

*[A program of] pelvic floor muscle strength training programme can add significantly to physical recovery after childbirth. Morkved & others.*

However several studies have found that women do not feel they are warned about the possibility of stress urinary incontinence after having a baby, that they feel embarrassed about raising the topic with their health care provider, that they would like more information about it and guidance on overcoming it. A UK study found that the instruction on pelvic floor exercising provided to new mothers was not provided on a systematic basis and was not of a high standard.

### Is it possible to reduce the likelihood of damage to the pelvic floor by exercising before or during pregnancy?

A strong pelvic floor is an excellent insurance against stress urinary incontinence at any stage of life.

There is evidence that a program of pelvic floor exercise during the first half of pregnancy can substantially reduce incontinence symptoms in later pregnancy and after birth (Sampelle) for women who are pregnant for the first time. And the strength of the pelvic muscle at 20 weeks of pregnancy is an excellent indicator of whether a woman is likely to suffer from incontinence later.

*A pelvic floor exercise program during pregnancy can also have a positive effect on the second stage of labour (Salvesen).*

### What are the best exercisers for strengthening the pelvic floor before pregnancy?

All our pelvic floor exercisers can play a role in strengthening the pelvic floor before pregnancy, so it is a question of choosing the type of exerciser that suits you most.

- Are you already able to locate your pelvic floor muscle, and now want to build strength?
- Or do you need help to locate the muscle and know if you are squeezing correctly?
- Do you want a product you can use while you move around?
- Or are you able and willing to allocate the time each day to laying still while you exercise your pelvic floor?

Ask yourself these questions, then visit our website and check out **Choosing an Exerciser**, before paying a visit to our **Online Shop**. To learn more about the benefits of each exerciser, read the more detailed information provided on each exerciser's own page, or contact us if you have any questions about exercisers, or choosing the best product for your situation. Alternatively, call us for leaflets about our products and how to choose, and we'll post them out to you.

### What are the best exercisers for strengthening the pelvic floor during and after pregnancy?

Manufacturers are cautious about the use of their devices during pregnancy, and generally advise against their use then, primarily to protect themselves against the possibility of claims following adverse events.

For women seeking an exerciser for postnatal use, exercisers should generally not be used for eight weeks after having a baby (and you should consult your health care provider before beginning an exercise program), but after that, all our exercisers can help you to strengthen your pelvic floor; again, it is a question of choosing the type of exerciser that suits you best.

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Please contact us if you have any questions about exercisers. Or seek advice from a health professional such as your GP, a women's health physiotherapist or gynaecologist.

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