



Abdominal muscle separation

Diastasis of rectus abdominis muscle

Physiotherapy Department

What is an abdominal muscle separation?

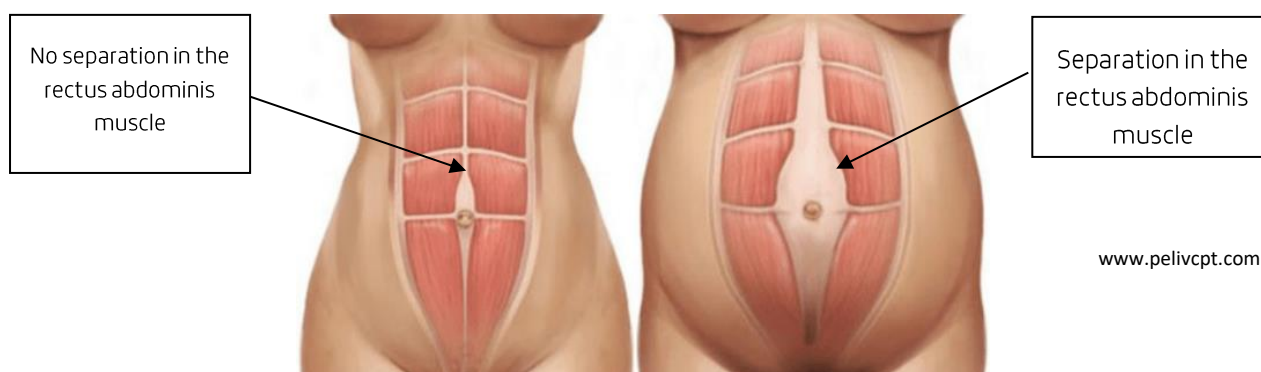
An abdominal muscle separation is a separation of the rectus abdominis muscles or 'six-pack muscles' on the front of your abdomen. The muscles have not 'split'. This is a common condition and usually improves significantly by 8 weeks after the birth of your baby.

What causes this separation?

Abdominal muscle separation is partly caused by the pressure of your growing baby, and partly caused by hormonal changes that take place during pregnancy. This change in hormones softens the muscles and connective tissues causing them to stretch. It usually starts in the second half of pregnancy. Other factors that can influence abdominal muscle separation – having multiple pregnancies, twin pregnancies, age, and genetic predisposition.

What might it mean to you?

You might notice a bulge (doming) or sag (indentation) through the gap near your belly button with some movements and notice that your tummy has changed in appearance. There is no evidence that abdominal muscle separation is linked to other issues such as lower back pain or muscle dysfunction.



What can be done to help?

The separation will usually improve significantly on its own over time. However many women will always have a small gap in the muscles.

For the first 6-8 weeks after the birth of your baby:

- Limit activities that cause a bulge or sag through the separation.
- When you are getting out of bed, roll onto your side first, then sit up.
- Minimise lifting anything heavier than your baby
- Avoid doing 'sit-ups' or abdominal crunches.
- Start pelvic floor exercises as soon as you feel ready – see our factsheet 'Pelvic Floor Exercises' www.barwonhealth.org.au/maternity-services/fact-sheets/postnatal
- Start going for regular gentle walks when you feel ready and gradually build up in time and distance.
- Wear firm compressive underwear/shape wear to help support your abdomen.

From 6-8 weeks onwards:

- Continue to build on your general fitness and progress the strength of your pelvic floor muscles.
- Your abdominal muscles will continue to regain strength gradually over the coming months.
- Low impact exercise is recommended for the first few months post birth, progressing to higher impact/ resistance exercise between 3-6 months. Monitor your abdominal muscle separation for bulging or sagging when returning to resistance or strength training exercise. You may need to use lighter weights or modify the exercises initially and build up gradually over time.
- Time frames will vary greatly between individuals dependent on factors such as pre-pregnancy fitness, recovery from birth etc.

How to monitor the recovery of your abdominal muscle separation:

Observe your tummy for bulging or sagging during activities such as getting up out of bed, bending or whilst completing any new exercises.

Although it is not necessary, some women like to know how to measure their separation post birth. To measure accurately, see below:

- Lie on your back with your knees bent up. Place one hand at the level of your belly button with fingers pointing into your belly.



- Now curl up your head and shoulders.
- You should feel the muscles come together on the left and right sides of your fingers
- Measure how many finger tips you can fit between the left and right sides.
- Check this no more than once per week.



When to seek help:

If you are concerned about your recovery, please ensure you read in detail and follow the advice from the relevant factsheets on the Barwon Health Maternity Services website:

www.barwonhealth.org.au/maternity-services/fact-sheets/postnatal

If you are still concerned, please speak with your midwife or GP to obtain a referral to a Pelvic Health Physiotherapist at Barwon Health on 4215 0826 or visit a private physiotherapist.