

## The Role of Physical Therapy in Perinatal Mental Health

### Scope of Practice

The role of a physical therapy practitioner is

- To address pregnancy and postpartum-related musculoskeletal problems.
- Educate on anatomy and positioning options for labor and delivery.
- Educate mothers on the physical postpartum recovery process and proper body mechanics.
- Treat to alleviate conditions through conservative, low-risk treatments to improve well-being and prevent long-term health concerns.

(American Physical Therapy Association, 2018; Critchley, 2022)

### Conditions for Referral

Symptomology of any of these conditions, without any improvement in the 6-8 weeks after delivery should result in referral to physical therapist (Critchley, 2022; The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists Committee Opinion No. 736, 2018).

- Pain (back, pelvic, hip)
- Incontinence
- Sexual dysfunction/ discomfort
- Severe fatigue
- Diastasis recti abdominis
- Difficulty with daily function

Pelvic Floor Dysfunction	Diastasis Recti Abdominis
<b>Risk Factors:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Smoking</li><li>- Vigorous exercise</li></ul>	<b>Risk Factors:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Age (increased age, increased risk)</li><li>- Weight before pregnancy</li></ul>

- High BMI
- High hip circumference
- Pre-pregnancy pelvic floor dysfunction
- Forcep delivery

(Durnea et al., 2017)

**Symptomology:**

- Fecal or urinary incontinence
- Overactive bladder symptoms
- Pain with sexual activity
- Perineal pain
- Constipation
- Pelvic organ prolapse

(Critchley, 2022)

- Weight gain during pregnancy
- Baby weight at birth
- Hypermobility of joints based on Beighton's hypermobility score
- Abdominal circumference at 35 weeks
- Exercise training before, during, and after pregnancy
- Type of delivery

(Cavalli et al., 2021).

**Symptomology:**

- Weakened abdominal
- A visible bulge that protrudes just above or below the belly button
- Softness or jelly like feeling around your belly button
- Coning or doming when contracting your abdominal muscles
- Difficulty lifting objects, walking or performing everyday tasks
- Pain during sex
- Pelvic, lower back or hip pain
- Poor posture
- Incontinence of urine
- Constipation
- Feeling weak in your abdominals

(Benjamin, et al., 2014; Cleveland Clinic, n.d.)

### Why a referral?

- **Chronic conditions can arise** when pelvic floor dysfunction is not addressed by a physical therapist. (Buurman & Lagro-Janssen, 2013; Domoulin et al., 2014; Gutzeit et al., 2019; MacAuthur et al., 2016; Mazur-Bialy et al., 2020; Ternent et al., 2009).
- **76% of women reported urinary incontinence at 3 months postpartum and continued to have incontinence 12 years later** (MacAurthur et al., 2016).
- Pelvic floor dysfunction is also associated with pelvic girdle pain and can result in pain with sexual activity. **Sexual function was reported to be affected by pain by 83% of women 2-3 months after delivery and 64% at 6 months postpartum** (Gutzeit et al., 2019).
- Pelvic floor dysfunction without being addressed can lead to **negative health consequences and decreased quality of life** due to decreased participation in exercise, social activities that could lead to mental health concerns such as feelings of isolation, depression, anxiety, decreased sexual satisfaction, and poor self-rated health (Buurman & Lagro-Janssen, 2013; Domoulin et al., 2014; Mazur-Bialy et al., 2020; Ternent et al., 2009)

### Prevalence

- Diastasis Recti Abdominis often occurs during pregnancy but can spontaneously heal after childbirth in most women (Cavalli et al., 2021).
- 33% of women still experience Diastasis Recti Abdominis at 12 months (Sperstad et al., 2016).

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