

FIND YOUR SECRET birth muscle

There's a little place inside your body that holds the key to an easier birth. Here's how to find it and work it

Every mum-to-be understands the importance of locating and working her pelvic floor muscles. These muscles help support your baby during pregnancy and can also help shorten the second stage of labour when you push your baby out.

But your pelvic floor is not the only core muscle that has an important role to play come b-day. You may not have heard of the psoas (pronounced 'so-as') muscle, but it's fundamental in allowing your pelvic bones to open so your baby can move through the birth canal, says Julie Long, founder of the Lazy Daisy Active Birth and antenatal programme (thelazydaisychain.co.uk).

WHERE CAN YOU FIND IT?

"The psoas is a long muscle that runs from the thoracic [centre] part of your spine opposite the belly button, through your pelvis and ends where it connects to the upper inner thigh," says Julie. You have a pair of these muscles and they help you walk upright, support your abdominal

organs, including the uterus, and allow you to lift your knee towards your chest.

Liz Koch, author of *The Psoas Book* (£10.75, Atlantic Books) and creator of Core Awareness (coreawareness.com), explains, "It grows out of the midline – an invisible line through the middle of the body – so the mum's psoas becomes the tracks the baby follows down into the birth canal."

WHAT DOES IT DO?

"The psoas lengthens if we stand with our leg slightly behind our body and contracts, when we sit," says Julie. "A shortened psoas will only make labour longer and harder, as it restricts the pelvis and hips from working as they should, and reduces space for your baby to move down."

It can also influence how you carry your little one. "All your organs sit on top of the psoas, including your uterus," says Liz. "If the psoas is tight or restricted, it's going to push the uterus forward and you'll get the lordotic look [also known as 'swayback', when the lower spine is too curved]. Rather than carrying the uterus deep

within the pelvis, it'll be slightly forward with more of the baby kind of sitting outside the body, rather than embedded deep within."

HOW DOES IT WORK?

The psoas may be hidden within your core, but there are lots of everyday things that can influence it physically, says Julie. "Walking off-balance in high heels, sitting for long periods, even walking too soon before our skeletal frame is ready to support us correctly. But it's a hugely emotional muscle, too," she adds.

Liz explains: "The psoas is a part of the fear reflex. It's one of the muscles that prepares us for fight or flight. When we feel afraid, our psoas contracts." Think of how your knees clamp together when the nurse asks you to flop them down during a smear test.

"As I tell all our mums, for years we've wired this muscle with the memory to shorten and hold tight when we talk about periods, sex, birth," says Julie. "How many of you nip your knees together at the thought of a baby crowning?"

THE HIDDEN BENEFITS

Overcoming fear is key to a shorter, less painful birth. Fear and anxiety cause your body to produce stress hormones, such as adrenalin. These can reduce blood flow to your uterus, and your uterus needs a good flow of blood to help it contract strongly. "Many antenatal programmes work on the emotional significance of fight or flight," says Julie. "However, few go on to look at what's happening with the psoas muscle to quite literally close the body."

Why is the psoas often overlooked when discussing childbirth? "Boy, if I knew the answer to that question, I'd be a wealthy woman," laughs Liz. "One reason is that you can't manipulate it easily because all of the organs are on top of it." Liz thinks it may be a cultural thing, too. "Not only is it part of the fear response, but it's part of the orgasmic response. The psoas is what allows full body

Psst... here's another mighty muscle

What? The piriformis is a small muscle deep in your bottom that rotates the leg outward. It runs from the base of the tailbone and attaches to the thighbone. "A shortened piriformis is often described as being a pain in the bum, because this is what it feels like," says Julie.

Why? "The tailbone is our very own birthing trap door, in that it's designed to subtly move backwards and 'flare open' as your baby moves through the pelvis, but a tight piriformis will prevent it from doing so," explains Julie.

How? Julie suggests massaging your bum with a tennis ball and doing hip flexing work. "Think Bollywood sequences and pelvic tilting."

Simple exercises could mean an easier labour

orgasm. So, for women who are orgasmic during birth, you could say their psoas is doing just fine. And people who are really afraid during birth, there's a response in their psoas," she says.

MAKE IT WORK FOR YOU

What can you do to help lengthen your psoas? Start by looking at your posture. In her classes, Julie teaches mums-to-be to stand with the whole foot grounded. "Almost like having three magnets sticking heel, big toe, little toe to the ground," she says. "Standing correctly means you're using the skeleton to do the work it needs to do and not relying on the psoas to hold you up."

Breathing and gentle stretching of the muscle can also help. "Simply sitting cross-legged and breathing is a good start. Adding in a gentle upward stretch, allowing your body to grow upward from the navel will extend this lengthening," says Julie.

Because the psoas is closely linked to our emotions, it's important to work on your anxiety about b-day, too. Think about where you want to give birth – is it somewhere you'll feel safe and relaxed? Antenatal classes can also help you learn techniques to tackle your fear, such as breathing and the power of positive thought.

"Releasing your psoas requires reconditioning years of negative thought, and turning that nipping of the knees into a feeling of being able to relax and release from the tummy button and through the pelvic floor," says Julie. **PPP**

YOUR NICE & EASY PRE-BIRTH WORKOUT

- 1 Simply lie on your back on a padded, carpeted floor.
- 2 Bend your knees, with your feet parallel and hip-width apart.
- 3 Place your heels 30–40cm away from your buttocks.
- 4 It's important not to push your lower back
- 5 Try to lay still for 10-20 minutes, with your arms resting by your side.
- 6 Congratulate yourself as following these steps will help relieve tension in your psoas and lower back.

