

## Don't Give Yourself a Hernia

**DO** remember that your protection from a hernia depends mainly on the integrity of your principal abdominal muscle, the *rectus abdominis* (popularly known as the "abs"), which runs down your front from the lower part of the rib cage to the pelvis.

**DO** ask your surgeon whether there is any medical or surgical reason why you should not exercise to strengthen your *rectus abdominis*. If you are given the all-clear, undertake a proper exercise programme. Gentle smooth progressive stretching will do you no harm, but don't bounce into a stretch; this is known as ballistic stretching, and should be avoided. Work through the easier exercises first, and always "Stop if it hurts!"

**DO** wear a support when undertaking heavy work if you have been advised to do so.

**DO** keep your body weight under control: being overweight is an invitation to a hernia. Work out your Body Mass Index (BMI), which equals (Weight in Kg) divided by (Height in metres)<sup>2</sup>. If your BMI is over 25, take steps to reduce it.

**DO** beware of any activity which causes you to hold your breath. This increases the pressure in the abdomen and therefore places increased demands on the abdominal muscles. If you can carry on talking - or even singing if the neighbours don't mind - then there should be no problem.

**DO** be careful about lifting: consider whether what you are proposing to lift is reasonable, and think about the best way to lift it. Keep the weight as close to the body as possible, at all times, and make sure that you can keep your balance.

**DO** think carefully about moving furniture. If you can slide it, preferably with your knee, that's fine, but think twice before you bend over and heave it. If you have a problem reaching the top cupboards in the kitchen, invest in a KickStep, which you can push around with your foot, and step up onto it comfortably.

**DON'T** kneel for too long when weeding the garden - try to keep moving. If you find it difficult to stand up from a kneeling position, consider using a kneeler, with support bars which you can hold to push yourself up.

If your favourite exercise is running, **DO** make sure that you run on a good surface. The consequences of a stumble, on a bad surface, could be serious.

If you enjoy riding, gentle hacking or basic dressage should pose no problems, but leave jumping until you can be more confident about your abdominal muscles.

**DO** think carefully about how you will mount the horse - better to use a milk crate, or even two, to start with.

Adrian March MA. PhD.