

**Post Natal Exercise**

Regular exercise has numerous health benefits, all of which apply equally to the new mother as at any other stage of life. These benefits include assistance with weight loss, increased aerobic fitness, social interaction and psychological wellbeing. Exercise after giving birth can also hasten recovery, and assist with muscle strength and toning.

**Always** consult with your doctor or midwife before starting any postnatal exercise program. Whether or not you are ready to exercise depends on individual factors. For instance, you may be advised to wait until your six-week postnatal check-up. In other cases, especially if you were exercising regularly throughout your pregnancy, you may be able to return to exercise sooner than that – perhaps within the first week or two.

**Benefits of Post Natal Exercise**

Exercising after you have your baby can improve your physical and mental wellbeing. It can:

* Help restore muscle strength and firm up your body
* Make you less tired because it raises your energy level and improves your sense of wellbeing
* Improve your mood, relieve stress and help prevent postpartum depression
* Improve your cardiovascular fitness and restore muscle strength
* Re-tone pelvic floor muscles to reduce risk of stress incontinence
* Re-tone abdominal muscles to increase strength, enable them to support spine & to regain figure
* Develop good technique in basic daily tasks, essential for back care
* Correct/regain good posture
* Enhance self confidence
* Promote Weight Loss – this is a long term aim & should not be a major concern immediately

It is not recommended that women return to sport or intense exercise before the six-week post natal check following a normal delivery. Mothers who have given birth via a caesarian should delay this further to approx 8-12 weeks. However during the initial few weeks it is a good idea to go for daily walks & to strengthen the abdominals & pelvic floor muscles using the static contractions.

**Exercising in the first few weeks after giving birth**

Gentle exercise (such as walking) can generally be started as soon as you feel comfortable. Start when you feel up to it. Some women will feel able to start exercising early others will not feel ready. Talk with your doctor about when is a good time for you to restart an exercise program.

If have had a [caesarean section](http://www.babycenter.com.au/a160/caesarean-section), you can still gently exercise your tummy muscles (in the ways discussed in this handout) Doing these exercises can help the muscles to recover from the operation. The exercises may pull on your scar, but they should not cause you any pain. If you have had a caesarean you may find that you become more tired because you have had an operation, so be guided by how you feel.

**Listen to your body**

When you start exercising after having a baby it's very important that you listen to your body. Don't be tempted to overdo things. If you become tired you'll be more likely to injure yourself.

You may feel on a "high" for the first few days and then come down to earth with a crash when the [baby blues](http://www.babycenter.com.au/a541888/the-baby-blues) kick in or you run out of energy. Try to pace yourself with a little bit of exercise followed by some well-earned rest.

If you are unsure about what you should be doing or experience pain or any problems with [leaking urine (incontinence)](http://www.babycenter.com.au/a553463/urinary-incontinence-after-birth) when you are exercising, talk to your doctor or midwife who may need to refer you to a physiotherapist.

**Getting Started**

The most important exercises in the first few days after birth are [pelvic floor exercises](http://www.babycenter.com.au/a1014312/your-pelvic-floor-after-birth), so start doing them as soon as you can. They may feel like the last thing you want to do, but starting them early will help your perineum and vagina to [heal more quickly](http://www.babycenter.com.au/a536343/stitches-and-bruising), improve the circulation to the area and help get rid of swelling and bruising, it can also guard against urine leaks. If you had a catheter inserted into your bladder after giving birth wait until it is taken out before starting the exercises. You won't rip your stitches by doing the exercises.

Pelvic floor exercises are just as important if you had a caesarean. [Just being pregnant](http://www.babycenter.com.au/a536339/your-pelvic-floor-in-pregnancy) can overload your pelvic floor. Pregnancy hormones loosen your pelvic floor and the weight of your baby stretches it further. The good news is that you should find it easier to do your exercises than someone who had a vaginal birth, as your pelvic floor will not feel as sore. Your nerves will not have been affected so your muscles will be firing on all cylinders!

If you had a vaginal birth you may find for the first few days or weeks that you can't feel your pelvic floor muscles working or that nothing is happening. Don't worry - this is normal. Keep trying, as the feeling in your pelvic floor will return after a few days and it will be working even if you can't feel it. For further information on the Pelvic Floor please see the separate Mind Body Maintenance Handout

**Pelvic Floor Exercises**

* Breathe in slowly & out gently squeeze your pelvic floor muscles. Pull your muscles up and in, as though trying to stop yourself weeing or passing wind.
* Hold a contraction for four or five seconds while you continue to breathe in and out as normal.
* You may feel your lower tummy muscles tightening, and that's fine. If you are tightening your upper tummy muscles (above your belly button) then you are trying too hard!
* Build up to holding a pelvic floor contraction for 10 seconds while breathing normally. If you lose your breathing control, stop and start again.

**Exercises for your lower tummy muscles**

Should be started as soon as possible following childbirth in the form of static contractions. How long it takes for tone to return varies considerably & is related to the condition of the abdominals beforehand.

The deepest level tummy muscle (called the transversus abdominus) is the most important tummy muscle to exercise after you have had a baby. The transversus abdominus works with your pelvic floor muscles to help support your back and pelvis. Exercising this muscle may help you to lose your 'pregnancy shape' and help to flatten your tummy.

Try this exercise either lying on your side or on your back with your knees bent up. (If you have had a caesarean section, you may find it uncomfortable to lie on your side for the first few days, so lie on your back).

1. Breathe in slowly tighten your pelvic floor muscles. The feeling is one of "squeeze and lift." Imagine that you are trying to stop yourself from passing wind and trying to stop your flow of urine mid-stream, at the same time. Once they are tight, gently pull your belly button in and up so that you feel your lower tummy muscles tighten.

2. Hold this while you count to 10 without holding your breath (this is the hard bit!) and then slowly relax your muscles. Wait at least five seconds and then repeat. Try to avoid moving your back or over-tightening the upper tummy muscles (those above your waist).

You may find that you can only hold a squeeze for a second or two in the early days; this is normal. Aim to hold your tummy muscles in for 10 seconds by the time your baby is about six weeks old.

**Pelvic tilting exercise**

Pelvic tilts are useful to gently move and stretch your back and also exercise your tummy muscles. They can also help to alleviate [back pain](http://www.babycenter.com.au/a536387/backache-and-back-pain). You can do pelvic tilts lying down, sitting or whilst balancing on an exercise ball.

**Lying down**
1. Lie down on the floor or on your bed. Place a pillow under your head. Bend your knees by sliding your feet up towards your bottom.

2. Tighten your pelvic floor and pull in your lower tummy muscles, before pressing the small of your back down into the floor or bed. So your tailbone lifts but your lower back stays down. Hold this for a count to three and then arch your back away from the floor or bed.

Repeat this 10 times. Try not to hold your breath!

**Sitting**
1. Sit on a chair or stool with your feet on the floor.

2. Tighten your pelvic floor muscles and pull in your lower tummy muscles before slumping your back and then arching it so you stick your chest and bottom out. Keep the exercise flowing smoothly so you stretch your back one way and then the other.

As soon as you feel up to it, try to get out and about, ideally walking whilst pushing your baby in his/her pram. In the first few days, your perineum or pelvic floor may feel uncomfortable, swollen or very heavy. Start with short (10 – 20 minute) walks and increase when things begin to feel more normal. If your lochia (vaginal discharge for first 14 days after birth) becomes redder or heavier, this may be a sign that you are overdoing things, so rest and take things easy.

**Things to avoid during the first 6 weeks**

Don't go swimming until you have had seven days without any [bleeding or discharge from your vagina](http://www.babycenter.com.au/a553465/lochia-postnatal-bleeding). If you have had stitches or a caesarean section, wait until after you have had your [six-week postnatal check](http://www.babycenter.com.au/a1047814/your-postnatal-check) and ask your doctor for advice.

Don't exercise in a hands-and-knees position for the first six weeks, as there is a small risk that a little clot of air can form at the site where your placenta was attached.

Wait six weeks before joining an exercise class, unless run by a specialist in the field of postnatal exercise and the instructor says that you can attend before the six weeks is up.

**After 6 weeks**

Six weeks after giving birth, most of the changes that occur during pregnancy will have returned to normal. If you had a caesarean birth, a difficult birth, or complications, it may take a little longer to feel ready to start exercising. If you did not exercise during pregnancy, start with easy exercises and slowly build up to harder ones.

Keep in mind your lower back and core abdominal muscles are weaker than they used to be. Your ligaments and joints are also more supple and pliable, so it is easier to injure yourself by stretching or twisting too much. Avoid any high-impact exercises or sports that require rapid direction changes.

**Abdominal Exercises**

Diastasis Recti is the separation of the abdominal muscles, it is quite common during pregnancy. The resulting stretching gradually closes over the next few weeks but in some cases it may take longer. It is not advisable to attempt any other form of abdominal training other than static contractions until this has occurred.

It is possible to check for realignment using the Diastasis Recti Check. This can be performed by you or an exercise professional. For further info on Diastasis Recti please see the separate Mind Body Maintenance handout.

**Exercise & Breastfeeding**

Always wear a good supporting bra & aim to exercise after feeding baby rather than before. This will reduce the weight of breasts & avoid loss of valuable nutrients due to leakage. Exercises using arms or upper body stretches can encourage leakage so it may be necessary to reduce arm & chest work at this time. Lying on the front is often uncomfortable due to breast tenderness.

Studies have shown that vigorous or regular exercise does not have adverse effects on a mother’s ability to successfully breastfeed as long as fluid and caloric intake are maintained. Some research, however, suggests that high-intensity physical activity can cause lactic acid to accumulate in breast milk and produce a sour taste a baby might not like. If you're breastfeeding, you can prevent this potential problem by sticking to low- to moderate-intensity physical activity and drinking plenty of fluids during and after your workout.

**Neck and upper back exercises**

It is easy to spend a lot of time sitting in a slumped position while you are caring for a young baby - while [breastfeeding](http://www.babycenter.com.au/a613/breastfeeding-for-beginners) for example. Poor posture can give you the appearance of rounded shoulders, saggy breasts and a saggy tummy, as well as neck or upper back pain. Sit upright in a supportive chair to help improve your posture. You can also try these exercises to stretch and move your upper back and neck.

**Joint Stability**

The effects of the hormone relaxin on ligaments can put joints at risk for approx 3-5 months following delivery. It is not advisable to resume participation in exercises which demand great stability around the joints & especially the lumbar spine until much later on. Relaxin affects joint stability for as long as breastfeeding continues

**Considerations for Pelvis**

Occasionally the symphisis pubis may be damaged during childbirth or as a result of extreme separation during pregnancy (Diastasis Pubis). This results in pain & requires treatment from a physiotherapist before more formal exercise is attempted

**Creating time for Post natal exercise**

When you're caring for a newborn, finding time for physical activity can be challenging. Some days you may simply feel too tired for a full workout. But that doesn't mean that you should put physical activity on the back burner. Do the best you can.

Suggestions include:

* Seek the support of your partner, family and friends. Exercise with a friend to stay motivated.
* Walking is a good way to get back in shape – all you need is a pair of comfortable shoes. It is free, and you can do it almost any place or time. You can also take your baby along. Walk your baby in the pram rather than use the car for short trips.
* Include your baby, lying next to you on the floor, while you do abdominal exercises.
* Exercising 10 minutes at a time is fine.
* Don’t be too hard on yourself if your exercise plans go awry. Just do the best you can, and remember – you will get more time to yourself as your baby settles into a predictable routine.
* Tummy and pelvic floor exercises can be done while you’re doing other tasks, either sitting or standing. To help you remember, try performing the exercises whenever you do certain things, such as breastfeeding or driving the car.

**Considerations in day-to-day life**

**Tips for back care and correct lifting technique**

* Bend your knees, keep your back straight and always tighten your pelvic floor and abdominal muscles. Hold the object firmly and close to your body.
* Do not lift anything heavier than the weight of your baby for the first 6 weeks.
* Avoid sudden and repetitive bending and twisting movements.
* Make sure your working surfaces are at waist height (e.g. bathing & changing the baby).
* Create a supportive position for feeding. Place your bottom back in the chair; make sure your feet are supported. If you are breastfeeding use support to help lift the baby up to your breast.



Remember any exercise program after the birth of a baby should start slowly. Exercises should not hurt, if you experience pain or any other unexplained symptoms stop the exercise and consult your doctor.

Regular exercise and sensible healthy eating are the best ways to lose weight slowly & cope physically & mentally with demands of looking after a new baby. The aim is for you to enjoy being a new mother not put pressure on yourself in any way.

I hope you have found this handout useful. If you have any further questions, please don’t hesitate to contact me.

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