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Exercise Tips for New Mothers

After nine months of carrying around that extra weight, you are probably ready to think about your own fitness, including how to shed those last few pounds that did not disappear when your baby was born.

On average, women gain about 30 pounds during pregnancy, 18 to 20 of which are usually lost within about a month of having the baby. That is when it gets tough. Those last five to 10 pounds can be hard to get rid of. Consistent, safe exercise can help you do just that and maintain your well-being, too.

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Take Your Time

Getting back to an exercise routine after the birth of your baby should be a gradual process. Your doctor may start you out with simple exercises for the first week or two, such as Kegel exercises and short, slow walks.

Kegel exercises, small contractions of the muscles at the vaginal wall and opening, should be a priority. They will help to repair and strengthen the pelvic floor. Slow walks during this initial period will not only help you to feel you are getting back into a fitness routine, but help you relieve tension and get some fresh air.

It is important not to push yourself too hard. Work to establish a regular walking time and keep a steady pace. A full-fledged return to the aerobic activities you participated in pre-pregnancy usually comes around the time of your postpartum doctor's visit, or after about six weeks.

Back pain and posture concerns are still present in the postpartum period. The abdominal wall is loose now that the uterus is no longer pressing against it, and it cannot adequately support the lower back. Try to incorporate lower-back exercises and range-of-motion movements to ease the strain and strengthen the lower back.

You may also experience upper-back strain caused by fatigue and breast weight if you are lactating. Shrugging the shoulders and performing flexibility exercises for the chest and back should provide relief.

Toning Your Middle

You may be anxious to begin abdominal exercises, but do only what you are capable of. Pelvic tilts and abdominal compression exercises are a good place to start. Remember to tighten the pelvic floor when performing these since they may place pressure on it and stretch it further. As your pelvic floor gradually becomes stronger, other curl-up exercises may be added.

Talk to your doctor before beginning any type of abdominal exercises or if you experience any pain or difficulties.

Eating Right

Your first instinct may be to start eating less to expedite weight loss, but since breastfeeding and increased physical activity require more energy during the postpartum period, this is not a good idea.

New mothers who breastfeed their babies should not cut their calorie intake. In fact, they should increase it. Breastfeeding mothers need to take in an additional 500 calories per day to provide their babies with the proper nutrients. If you skimp on calories, you are less likely to get the nutrients both you and your baby need.

Caesarean Care

If you have had your baby by Caesarean section, your body will need more time to heal and regain strength, and chances are you will feel less like plunging into an exercise routine. Start slow and use caution when exercising, especially with your abdominal muscles. It is important to consult with

your doctor to develop a safe exercise program.

Develop a Plan

Talk with your doctor before and after delivery to determine the best plan for you to follow once your baby is born, and do not hesitate to consult with him or her at any time if you have questions. Go slowly with exercise to build a safe foundation for taking care of you and your newborn, and you will both be on the pathway to good health and well-being.

Resources

- American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists: www.acog.org/patient-resources/faqs/labor-delivery-and-postpartum-care/exercise-after-pregnancy (<http://www.acog.org/patient-resources/faqs/labor-delivery-and-postpartum-care/exercise-after-pregnancy>)
- WomensHealth.gov: www.womenshealth.gov (<http://www.womenshealth.gov>)

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