

Exercising After the Birth

By Allana Robertson RN, RM, BA, MNursing, Grad Dip Education

Regular exercise after you have a baby has a number of benefits. It will help with

- Speedier healing and recovery
- Faster return to you pre-pregnancy shape and level of fitness
- Increased energy to cope with the demands of new motherhood
- Reduced stress and depression.

When can I start exercising?

Some exercises can start immediately after birth. These include pelvic floor exercises, pelvic tilts, ankle circling and walking. Other exercises are best postponed until you check with your obstetrician. Resting and bonding with your baby are more important than pulling on your trainers for the first couple of weeks.

Pregnancy splits your abdominal muscles and it is important to make sure your muscles have healed before you begin any vigorous abdominal workouts. To check, lie on your back with one hand on your abdomen. Breathe out. Lift your head and shoulders off the floor and clench your abdomen. Feel for any gap in your abdominal muscles. If you are unsure please check with your doctor. Keep in mind that your ligaments and joints will be loose for a few months after birth, so avoid any high impact exercises or sports that require rapid direction changes. Also, be very careful when bending and lifting to avoid back strain. Vigorous stretching should be avoided as well. Listen to your body and always stop if you experience any pain.

What exercise can I do?

Pelvic floor exercises (Kegels) are very important to reduce the risk of future urinary incontinence. These can be commenced immediately after birth (even caesarean section) and can be done while you are sitting, breastfeeding, brushing your teeth or watching television. Squeeze the pelvic floor muscles that surround your vagina, urethra (front passage) and anus (back passage) for three seconds, relax for three seconds and squeeze again. Begin with 10 repetitions and gradually increase the length of the squeeze and the number per day.

Walking is a good choice, even if you have had a caesarean section, because you can set the pace to your energy level. It can improve circulation, decrease the risk of blood clots, reduce intestinal swelling and promote healing. Walking is a great stress buster and it gives you an opportunity to get out of the house and get some fresh air.

Swimming is another great exercise after you have had your baby and is very popular in the hot summer months in Hong Kong. Obstetricians have varied opinions as to when you can start swimming. Most agree that tampon use is best avoided in the first 4 to 6 weeks so you may not be able to swim until your lochia (vaginal loss) is very light. Others say that if you can insert a tampon comfortably and your lochia is light, it is ok to use the tampon while you are swimming. It is best to check with your doctor first.

Low impact aerobics, pilates, yoga, aquarobics, lightweight training and cycling are also good. Check with your doctor first.

The Californian Pacific Medical Centre's Women and Infants Centre has a very useful website which describes and shows pictures of post partum exercises that can be done from the first day. The website is:

www.cpmc.org/services/pregnancy/information/postpartum-exercises.html

Exercise and Breastfeeding

Research studies of postpartum mothers have concluded that moderate exercise does not adversely affect breastfeeding, milk composition or infant weight gain. Because exercising with full breasts may feel uncomfortable, feed or pump prior to exercising. If wearing one sports bra for support isn't enough, try wearing two. It is important to drink lots of water to avoid dehydration.

How much exercise should I do?

Aim to exercise three or four times a week. Don't be hard on yourself if your exercise plans go awry- you will get more time to yourself as your baby settles into a predictable routine. If you experience any changes in vaginal flow (lochia), such as increased heaviness or changes in colour, see your doctor. Do not expect too much too soon. Allow yourself a reasonable length of time, such as a year to get back into pre-pregnancy shape.

References:

Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada, Joint SOGC/CSEP Clinical Practice Guideline, *Exercise and Pregnancy in the Postpartum Period*, (No. 129, June 2003 pp.1-7)

Keeler, S.(April 1, 2002) University of New Hampshire News Bureau, *New Study Shows Exercise Fine for Breastfeeding Moms*

Ringdahl, E (2002) The Physician and Sports medicine, *Exercising After You Have Your Baby*,(Vol. 30, No.2, February 2002).

www.babycenter.com/expert/baby/postpartumfitness/1156153.html

www.bcparent.com/articles/health/good_news.html

www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Post_natal_exercise_iss

www.cpmc.org/services/pregnancy/information/postpartum-exercises.html

www.health.nsw.gov.au/health-public-affairs/mhcs/publications/5610.html