

PATIENT EDUCATION



The American College of
Obstetricians and Gynecologists
WOMEN'S HEALTH CARE PHYSICIANS

Exercise After Pregnancy

Being physically active in the postpartum period (after giving birth) is good for both you and your newborn. Exercise can relieve stress, give you more energy, and help you maintain a healthy weight. Being physically active has other rewards as well. Taking time for physical activity is a great way for you and your family to spend time together. It also sets a good example for your children to follow.

This pamphlet explains

- the benefits of exercise
- the latest guidelines for physical activity
- a good workout to get you started

Benefits of Exercise

When you are caring for a newborn, finding time for exercise can be a challenge. Hormonal changes can affect you emotionally, and sleepless nights can be exhausting. Although you may feel too tired to exercise, being active actually can give you more energy. Even exercising for a few minutes each day has benefits, including

- strengthening and toning abdominal muscles
- boosting energy
- helping prevent *postpartum depression*
- promoting better sleep
- relieving stress

Another benefit of exercise is that it can help you lose the extra pounds that you may have gained during pregnancy and help you to keep them off. If

you are planning to become pregnant again, starting out at a healthy weight increases your chances for a healthy pregnancy and can decrease the risk of several pregnancy complications. Staying at a healthy weight throughout your life also decreases your risk of major health problems, such as *diabetes mellitus*, cardiovascular disease, and certain types of cancer.

Guidelines for Physical Activity

After having a baby, women should get at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity every week. An aerobic activity is one in which you move large muscles of the body (like those in the legs and arms) in a rhythmic way. Moderate intensity means you are moving enough to raise your heart rate and start sweating. You can still talk normally, but you cannot sing.

Examples of moderate-intensity aerobic activities include brisk walking and riding a bike on a level surface. You can divide the 150 minutes into 30-minute workouts on 5 days of the week or into smaller 10-minute sessions throughout each day. For example, you could go for three 10-minute walks each day.

A vigorous-intensity activity is one in which it is hard to talk without pausing for breath. If you followed a vigorous-intensity exercise program before pregnancy, it may be possible to return to your regular workouts soon after the baby is born. Be sure to get your health care professional's approval.

You also should do muscle-strengthening workouts on at least 2 days a week. This type of exercise works the body's major muscle groups, such as the legs, arms, and hips. Examples include yoga, Pilates, lifting weights, sit-ups, and push-ups. There also are special exercises that help tone the muscles of the pelvic floor (see box "Kegel Exercises"). Muscle-strengthening activities should be done in addition to your aerobic activity.

Getting Started

If you had a healthy pregnancy and a normal vaginal delivery, you should be able to start exercising again soon after the baby is born. Usually, it is safe to begin exercising a few days after giving birth—or as soon as you feel ready. If you had a *cesarean birth* or other complications, ask your health care professional when it is safe to begin exercising again.

Your Workout

When you are ready to start exercising, walking is a great way to get back in shape. Another good way to get daily exercise is by joining an exercise class. Check with your local fitness clubs or community centers for classes that interest you, such as yoga, Pilates, spinning, and dance. Some gyms offer special postpartum exercise classes and classes you can take with your baby.

If you do not want to join a gym but want the benefits of having someone to exercise with, ask a friend to be your workout buddy. If you want to exercise on your own, check out fitness videos and online exercise programs. Many are designed for women who have just had a baby.

You may already have a great exercise tool in your pocket. Smart phone apps for exercise and fitness can help you stay motivated, keep track of your progress, and connect you with others with the same exercise goals. Many are free or cost very little.

Prepare for Your Workout

As you get ready for your workout, follow these steps:

- Wear loose-fitting clothing that will help keep you cool.
- If you are breastfeeding, feed your baby or express your milk before your session to avoid any discomfort that may come from engorged breasts.
- Wear a bra that fits well and gives plenty of support to protect your breasts.

Kegel Exercises

Kegel exercises help tone the muscles that support your *urethra*, *bladder*, *uterus*, and *rectum*. Strengthening these muscles may help improve bladder control. After delivery, they may help tighten vaginal muscles that are stretched from childbirth. Here is how they are done:

- Squeeze the muscles that you use to stop the flow of urine. This pulls the vagina and rectum up and back.
- Hold for 3 seconds, then relax for 3 seconds.
- Do 10 contractions three times a day.
- Increase your hold by 1 second each week. Work your way up to 10-second holds.

Make sure you are not squeezing your stomach, thigh, or buttock muscles. You also should breathe normally. Do not hold your breath as you do these exercises.

You can do Kegel exercises anywhere—while working, driving in your car, or watching television. But you should not do these exercises when you are urinating.

- Have a bottle of water handy and take several sips during the session.

Start With Simple Moves

Aim to stay active for 20–30 minutes a day. When you first start exercising after childbirth, try simple postpartum exercises that help strengthen major muscle groups, including abdominal and back muscles (see "Postpartum Exercises"). Gradually add moderate-intensity exercise. Remember, even 10 minutes of exercise benefits your body. If you exercised vigorously before pregnancy or you are a competitive athlete, you can work up to vigorous-intensity activity. Stop exercising if you feel pain.

Postpartum Exercises

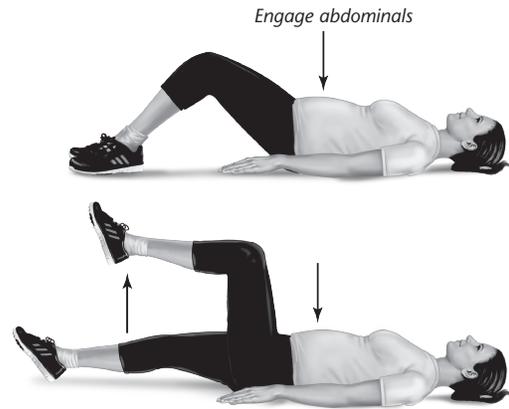
During pregnancy, the growing uterus stretches the muscles in your abdomen and your lower back—your "core" muscles. The following exercises are designed to be done in order to gradually help tone and strengthen these muscles. Repeat all exercises 4–6 times. Make sure you get your health care professional's approval before starting any exercise program after pregnancy.

1. 4-Point Kneeling

Strengthens and tones the abdominal muscles.

- Kneel on all fours. Position your hips directly over your knees and position your shoulders directly over your hands. Keep your back straight.

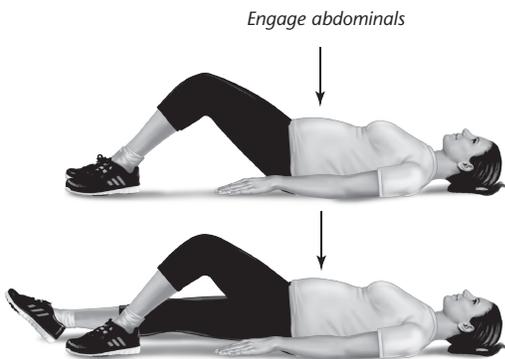
- Inhale deeply. Then exhale. As you exhale, pull your abdominal muscles in. This is called engaging your abdominal muscles. Do not hold your breath. Keep your back straight.



2. Leg Slides

Tones abdominal and leg muscles.

- Lie flat on your back, bending your knees slightly, with your feet flat on the floor. Engage your abdominal muscles. Don't move your back.
- Inhale and slide one leg from a bent to a straight position.
- Exhale and bend it back again. Don't hold your breath.
- Keep both feet on the floor and keep them relaxed.
- Repeat with opposite leg.



3. Knee Raises

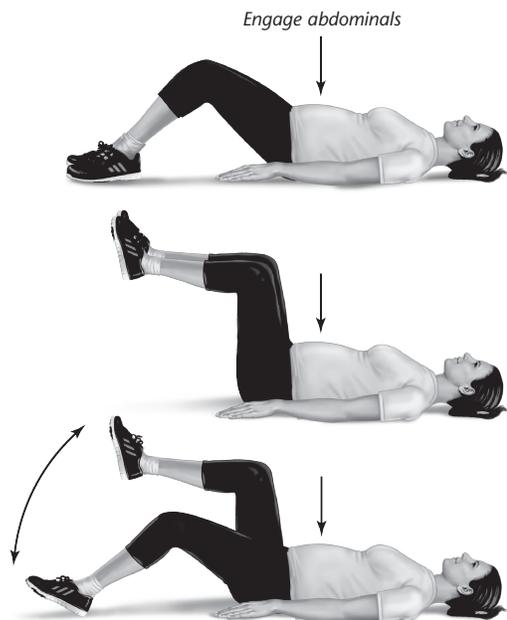
Strengthens core and lower back muscles.

- Lie flat on your back, bending your knees slightly, with your feet flat on the floor.
- Raise one leg with your knee bent so that your knee is above your hip. Slide your other leg from a bent position to a straight position.
- Keep your abdominal muscles engaged. Don't move your back. Don't hold your breath.
- Return to starting position. Repeat with opposite leg.

4. Heel Touches

Strengthens core and lower back muscles.

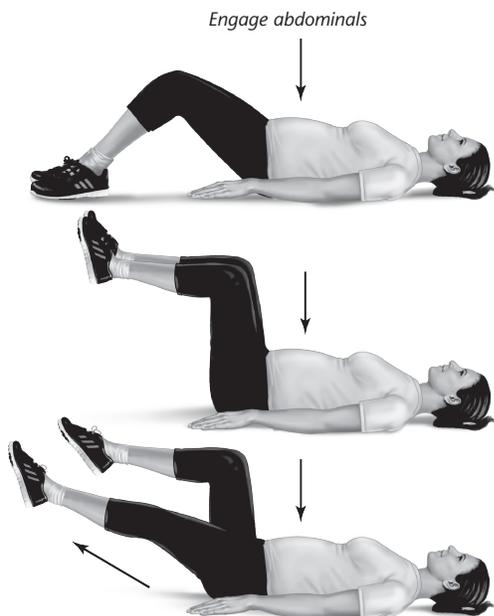
- Lie flat on your back, bending your knees slightly, with your feet flat on the floor.
- Raise both legs with knees bent at a 90-degree angle above your hips. Your calves should be parallel to the floor.
- Lower one leg to the floor, keeping your knee bent, and touch your heel to the floor. Keep your knee bent at a 90-degree angle.
- Keep your abdominal muscles engaged. Don't move your back. Don't hold your breath.
- Return to starting position. Repeat with opposite leg.



5. Leg Extensions

Strengthens core, hip, and lower back muscles.

- Stay flat on your back, bending your knees slightly, with your feet flat on the floor.
- Raise both legs with knees bent at a 90-degree angle above your hips. Your calves should be parallel to the floor.
- Extend one leg out with your foot 12 to 24 inches off the floor. Keep your abdominal muscles engaged. Don't hold your breath.
- Return to starting position. Repeat with opposite leg.



Finally...

Exercising after you have your baby may take extra effort, but it has great benefits for your physical and mental well-being. Schedule time to be active on most days of the week. Join an exercise class or work out with a family member or friend to stay motivated. Remember that exercise should be a part of your routine for a healthy lifestyle for years to come.

Glossary

Bladder: A hollow, muscular organ in which urine is stored.

Cesarean Birth: Birth of a fetus from the uterus through an incision (cut) made in the woman's abdomen.

Diabetes Mellitus: A condition in which the levels of sugar in the blood are too high.

Kegel Exercises: Pelvic muscle exercises. Doing these exercises helps with bladder and bowel control as well as sexual function.

Postpartum Depression: A type of depressive mood disorder that develops in the first year after the birth of a child. This type of depression can affect a woman's ability to take care of her child.

Rectum: The last part of the digestive tract.

Urethra: A tube-like structure. Urine flows through this tube when it leaves the body.

Uterus: A muscular organ in the female pelvis. During pregnancy, this organ holds and nourishes the fetus.

This information was designed as an educational aid to patients and sets forth current information and opinions related to women's health. It is not intended as a statement of the standard of care, nor does it comprise all proper treatments or methods of care. It is not a substitute for a treating clinician's independent professional judgment. Please check for updates at www.acog.org to ensure accuracy.

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