



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

FAQ131

LABOR, DELIVERY, AND POSTPARTUM CARE

Exercise After Pregnancy

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What are some of the benefits of exercise for postpartum women?

Exercise has the following benefits for postpartum women:

- It helps strengthen and tone abdominal muscles.
- It boosts energy.
- It may be useful in preventing postpartum depression.
- It promotes better sleep.
- It relieves stress.

How much should I exercise after I have a baby?

After having a baby, you should get at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity every week.

What is aerobic activity?

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.

What is moderate-intensity activity?

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 choose to 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.

What is vigorous-intensity activity?

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.

What are muscle-strengthening workouts and how often should I do them?

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 (called **Kegel exercises**) that help tone the muscles of the pelvic floor. Muscle-strengthening activities should be done in addition to your aerobic activity on at least 2 days a week.

When can I start exercising after pregnancy?

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.

What are some guidelines I can follow when I begin exercising after pregnancy?

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. 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.

What are some ways to start exercising?

When you are ready to start exercising, walking is a great way to get back in shape. Walking outside has an added bonus because you can push your baby in a stroller. There are special strollers made for this kind of activity, but using a regular stroller is fine. Another good way to get daily exercise is by joining an exercise class. Working out with a group and socializing with group members can help keep you motivated.

Where can I find out about exercise classes?

Check with your local fitness clubs or community centers for classes that interest you, such as yoga, Pilates, spinning, and dance. Some gyms even offer special postpartum exercise classes and classes you can take with your baby. You also might consider working out with a personal trainer for the first few weeks.

What can I do if I want to exercise but I don't want to join a gym?

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 DVDs and online exercise programs. Many are designed for women who have just had a baby. Some even show you how to involve your baby in the exercise routines.

How can I stay motivated once I start exercising?

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 apps are free or cost very little.

How should I prepare for my 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 workout 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.
- Have a bottle of water handy and take several sips during your workout.

How should I warm up before my workout?

Spend 10 minutes warming up to get your muscles ready for exercise. Try stretches for the lower back, pelvis, and thighs. Hold stretches for several seconds and return to the starting position. Walking in place also is a good way to warm up.

How should I cool down after my workout?

End your workout with a 5-minute cool-down period that brings your heart rate back to normal. Walk slowly in place and stretch again to help avoid soreness.

Glossary

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

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

If you have further questions, contact your obstetrician–gynecologist.

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