

FitFacts®



Postpartum Health

AFTER NINE MONTHS OF CARRYING EXTRA WEIGHT AROUND, YOU'RE PROBABLY READY TO SHED THE LAST FEW POUNDS. WOMEN GAIN ABOUT 30 POUNDS DURING PREGNANCY AND LOSE ABOUT 18 TO 20 POUNDS IN THE FIRST MONTH AFTER GIVING BIRTH. DROPPING THE LAST FIVE TO 10 POUNDS CAN BE CHALLENGING. THE TRICK IS ADDING A CONSISTENT EXERCISE PROGRAM TO AN OVERALL HEALTHY LIFESTYLE.

BACK IN THE SWING

Before jumping back into your pre-pregnancy exercise routine, keep in mind that your body is still trying to normalize from the stresses of a pregnancy. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) advocates resuming pre-pregnancy exercise regimens as soon as it is medically and physically safe. The amount of time until it is considered “safe” varies, with some women able to resume exercise within days of delivery. Talk with your doctor about when is a good time for you to restart an exercise program.

Many of the physiological changes of pregnancy persist until about four to six weeks postpartum. Of course, that doesn't mean you can't exercise in the first month and a half after delivering your baby; it just means you should gradually ease into an exercise routine. In the first six weeks following your baby's birth, use your exercise program to help you obtain personal time and a sense of control. Slowly increase exercise frequency, duration and/or intensity. Avoid excessive fatigue and dehydration; support and compress your abdomen and breasts; and regularly assess if it hurts or if you are progressing too quickly. If you notice bright red vaginal bleeding that is heavier than a menstrual period, seek medical attention.

Aim to build up to 30 minutes to one hour of moderate-intensity aerobic exercise three to six days per week supplemented with two or three days of muscle toning. (You may be wondering when you can start doing “abs”—[pelvic tilts](#) and abdominal compression exercises are a good place to start. Remember to tighten the pelvic floor when performing these exercises to avoid too much pressure and further stretching. As your pelvic floor gradually strengthens, add other curl-up exercises. Don't forget to also exercise your lower back.) It's okay to be creative if it is occasionally necessary to exercise with your new baby or other children.

If you're breastfeeding, exercise at a low- to moderate-intensity (<12 on a 6 to 20 ratings of perceived exertion scale) to prevent lactic acid accumulation in breast milk. (If you end up exercising at a higher intensity, pump and discard milk produced during the first 30 minutes postexercise.)

CAESAREAN CARE

If you had a Caesarean section, your body will need more time to heal and regain its strength. Consult with your physician to develop a safe exercise program. Remember to start slowly and use caution, especially when working your abdominal muscles.

EATING RIGHT

Pregnancy and the postpartum period provide an excellent opportunity to permanently adopt healthful nutritional changes, including increased fruit, vegetable and whole grain intake. Aim to follow a healthy, nutrient-dense diet similar to that recommended by [ChooseMyPlate.gov](#). For at least the first month or two postpartum, also be sure to continue prenatal vitamins to help replenish your nutrient stores. Consider an omega-3 fatty acid (DHA, EPA or ALA) supplement for your heart health, and, if you're breastfeeding, to help your baby's cognitive, visual and cardiovascular development.

Keep in mind that breastfeeding moms expend an additional 500 calories per day. Not only does this help to kickstart your postpartum weight loss, but breastfeeding also provides innumerable benefits to you and your baby.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Talk with your doctor before and after delivery to determine the best plan for you. Go slowly with exercise to build a safe foundation for taking care of you and your newborn and you'll both be on a path to good health and well-being. If you find yourself in a rut, don't hesitate to contract your nearest ACE-certified Fitness Professional with expertise in postnatal exercise.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

American Council on Exercise—[Pre- and Post-Natal Fitness](#) by Lenita Anthony [Babycenter](#)

[U.S. Department of Health and Human Services](#)