

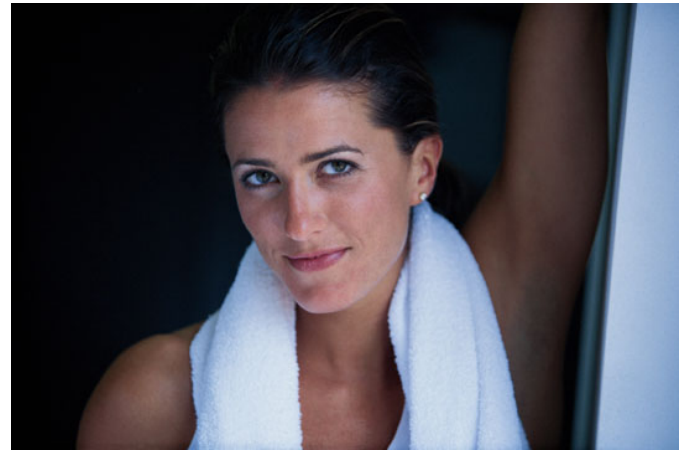
Get Your Body Back

A Guide to Exercising After Baby

by Teri Brown

After professional figure skating coach Sarah DeSemple delivered her first child, she wanted to get into shape and onto the ice – fast. She had students waiting for her and personal skating goals to obtain. She felt she didn't have time to waste.

"Getting back in shape was important to me because I have goals that I want to reach and I couldn't work toward them if I didn't drop the baby weight," says DeSemple, a mother of two from Milwaukie, Ore. "I began skating, pushing my endurance on the ice and I also really watched my relationship with food."



DeSemple had a difficult first labor and couldn't begin working out until 12 weeks postpartum. After her second child, however, she was quickly back on the ice. Because of her love for skating, pushing herself wasn't difficult. As a perfectionist, she had to learn to be easier on herself.

"If you are a perfectionist like me and always question whether you are working hard enough, you need to keep in mind that sometimes just working your body out is a 'victory,'" says DeSemple. "Having a baby is no small thing, and having unrealistic expectations of yourself is mentally defeating and harmful to your heart."

Getting Started

It takes several weeks after childbirth before an exercise routine can begin. Corry Matthews, a pre- and postnatal fitness expert with Gold's Gym International, believes the first thing women should do when they want to work out is check with a doctor.

"Before beginning a postnatal exercise program, a new mom should receive approval from her doctor to begin exercising," says Matthews. "This usually happens about four to six weeks for vaginal deliveries and six to eight weeks for Cesarean births."

Matthews says that prior to starting regular exercise, new moms can practice abdominal hollowing and light walking. Abdominal hollowing is done lying on your back and drawing your naval to your spine and holding it there while breathing. The back should stay touching the floor. Eventually, you can add an abdominal crunch to the hold or movement.

According to Matthews, initial postnatal exercises should focus on strengthening the abdominals: hollowing, crunches, lower back exercises (small range of motion back extensions) and pelvic floor exercises such as Kegels.

A Healthy Strategy

Many women concentrate on their stomachs after pregnancy, and Matthews says that while strengthening your abdominal region is important, spot shaping is a myth. It is better for Mom and Baby to concentrate on overall health and physical fitness.



"Focus on getting a little here and a little there," says Matthews. "It's rare to find large blocks of time to exercise after a new baby comes."

Dawn-Marie Ickes, a licensed physical therapist and owner of Core Conditioning, a Pilates studio based in Los Angeles, Calif., believes that isometric abdominal exercises are perfect for the new mother to begin with, as they can be done anytime, anywhere.

"By definition, isometric exercises are those in which a force is applied to a resistant object," says Ickes. "There may not be actual movement, but tension builds up in the muscles. One example is the Isometric Crunch. Pretend you're having your picture taken and hold in your stomach muscles. This also helps improve posture."

Ickes believes it helps to do gentle and safe exercises as part of daily baby care so that they are functional and easy to remember. For example, new moms can use diaper change time as a mental cue to do isometric exercises.

Though most experts agree that light exercising, such as walking, abdominal hollowing and isometric crunches are safe fairly soon after delivery, caution is the name of the game.

"There are a couple of things women should be on the lookout for," says Ickes. "Pelvic

instability is one of them. A key indicator is increased pain and stiffness in the back and pelvis after walking 15 minutes or so. Neck strain, caused by new postural demands, like nursing, is another problem to be aware of. Continence issues which do not resolve within the first four to six weeks is another common problem."

One of the most important things to remember while getting back in shape, especially during the early days after delivery, is patience.

"It took 40 weeks to have the baby, so give yourself 40 weeks to get back into shape," says Matthews.

Exercises at Home

The following exercise tips are given by Mare Petras, one of the original organizers of the first "Great American Workout" for the President's Council on Physical Fitness & Sports and author of the book, *Fitness Simply: Tone Up With Wine and Other Fun Fit Tips* (Micropress, 2004). These tips will help you get into shape so the only baby weight you will be carrying is your baby!



Diaper Stretches

1. Standing feet shoulder width apart, hold the diaper (which adds resistance) in front of your hips with your arms down straight. Inhale. Take arms up to shoulder level (keep adding resistance), then bring them overhead with shoulders dropped. Inhale. Lift higher and exhale, stretching to the side. Inhale in place and then exhale to come up to center. Other side. Benefits: works arms, shoulders and stretches torso. 2. Stand as above, but hold diaper

behind your back and lift your hands away from your bottom. Benefits: stretches chest, arms.

3. Stand as above, but drop chin to chest and place diaper around the back of the head, adding gentle resistance to stretch the neck. Benefits: stretches back of neck and shoulders, releases stress.

4. Sitting (with baby between legs) stretched in a V, wrap diaper around right ball of foot, then bend at the hips to stretch forward. Pull your navel back to your spine. A flexed foot will work calf muscles. Other side. Benefits: stretches back of legs, ab strengthening, bonding with baby.

Additional Tips

Remember to keep your abdominal muscles tight and use the strong muscles in your legs as you position your baby in the carrier, lift your baby from his crib or take groceries out of the car.

Practice your posture. After carrying a "front load" for 9 months, it's time to realign your spine. In the car, while you are feeding your baby or standing in line at the grocery store, imagine a string pulling you like a puppet, lengthening and realigning your spine.