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5 Ways to Return to Your Pre-Baby Body

While moderate weight gain is a common concern for women during and after pregnancy, there are many other factors to consider in the 4 to 6 weeks after childbirth. You may want to get back into pre-pregnancy shape immediately, but it is important to make a slow return to full activity. Here are some tips on what you can do in the first 6 weeks after delivery to begin getting your body back into pre-pregnancy shape.

1. Get help with tasks. A new mom needs an ally in the weeks following childbirth. During this time, a woman should not lift anything heavier than her baby, in spite of the temptation. Make sure all the heavy nursery equipment is set up by someone else in advance of the baby's arrival. It's important now for you to rest and engage in light activities only.

2. Breathe. Believe it or not, something as natural and instinctive as breathing will require focus after childbirth. This is because the growing uterus pushes the diaphragm upward, causing it to lose its ability to descend during inhalation. Since the diaphragm forms the top of the core muscles, it is important to work with a physical therapist, who will prescribe exercises to help restore your diaphragm function to its full capacity.

3. Focus on your core. A woman's abdominal muscles undergo a great deal of strain during pregnancy. In fact, separation of abdominal muscles, called diastasis recti, is a common occurrence. Also, engaging in inappropriate exercise, such as sit ups, can worsen the problem for some women. A physical therapist can prescribe exercises to help "close the gap" between muscles. Gentle core-strengthening exercises also can be done, paving the way for more-vigorous abdominal exercises 6 or more weeks after delivery.

4. Strengthen abdominal and pelvic floor muscles. Physical therapists recommend that immediately post-partum, women focus on exercising the abdominal muscles and the muscles of the pelvic floor. During pregnancy, these muscles often are stretched and weakened. Strengthening them gives women a strong, stable base from which to work and move. This can alleviate pain later on, and makes much



simpler such tasks as carrying the baby, getting in and out of the car, and lifting and reaching.; Women who have had a caesarian section should be watchful of discomfort during abdominal exercise. Pain could indicate that the exercise is being done too soon, incorrectly, or too vigorously.

Fortunately, women can do gentle Kegel (pelvic floor) exercises immediately after childbirth, whether the birth was vaginal or by caesarian section. Kegels can be done during everyday activities such as nursing or feeding the baby. Strengthening the pelvic floor also can improve sexual satisfaction and help prevent incontinence. Physical therapists can recommend several types of Kegel exercises—for endurance, (in which the woman contracts or lifts the pelvic floor muscles and holds them for 5 to 10 seconds) and to produce quick, brisk muscle contractions.

5. Every minute counts. Over time, a woman may begin incorporating fitness into her everyday routines—such simple activities as taking a family walk around the neighborhood or participating in a fitness group with other new moms. Remember to go at your own pace. New moms should sleep whenever they have the opportunity.

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