FIT for Motherhood

Essential exercises and helpful advice to get you back into shape after the birth of your baby.

ASSOCIATION OF CHARTERED PHYSIOTHERAPISTS IN WOMEN'S HEALTH
After you have given birth, you'll understandably want to give your baby lots of attention. Even so, it's important to take a little time for yourself. By regaining your fitness, you'll feel good and have more energy - and you could well avoid health problems in the future.

This leaflet offers guidance on safe and effective exercises that will help you get back into shape. The ‘Fit for motherhood’ programme should be easy to do, need little effort - and you'll soon see the results. If you've had a caesarean section, these exercises are still ideal. Just remember, start gently and progress slowly.

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Exercising your pelvic floor muscles

Your most important step.
Looking after your pelvic floor muscles is essential - following the birth and throughout your life. Initially, exercising them could help reduce discomfort and swelling. Longer term, toning up the muscles may prevent leakage from your bladder or bowel. It can also help safeguard against prolapse and may improve your sex life.

The basic pelvic floor exercise
Many women need a little guidance on how to do the basic pelvic floor exercise. Simply get yourself into any comfortable position and follow the instructions below.

Imagine that you are trying to stop yourself from passing wind and at the same time trying to stop your flow of urine. The feeling is one of ‘squeeze and lift’, closing and drawing-up the back and front passages. This is called a pelvic floor contraction.

Remember
You should start gently and stop if it hurts. Don't pull in your stomach excessively, squeeze your legs together, tighten your buttocks or hold your breath.
Toning up your pelvic floor

The pelvic floor exercise programme

Now that you can do the basic pelvic floor exercise, you can use it to gradually tone up your muscles.

Make sure you read right through this section before you begin.

This programme is designed to build up the endurance of the pelvic floor muscles, so that they will be able to work harder and longer. Firstly, though, you'll need to determine your 'starting block'.

Tighten your pelvic floor muscles as previously described and hold for as many seconds as you can (maximum of 10 seconds).

How many seconds can you hold this contraction? ☐

Release the contraction and rest for four seconds. Then repeat the 'tighten, hold and release' movement as many times as you can (up to a maximum of 10).

How many times can you repeat this? ☐

For example, if you can hold the contraction for two seconds and repeat four times, this is your 'starting block'.

Now perform the basic pelvic floor exercise - but squeeze and lift more firmly, then let go. This is called a quick contraction and will help your muscles react quickly when you laugh, cough, sneeze, exercise or lift.

How many quick contractions can you do? ☐

Aim to increase this number, up to a maximum of 10.
Toning up your pelvic floor

You should try to repeat your starting block and quick contractions four to six times a day.

By following these exercises, your pelvic floor will get stronger. Your starting block will gradually change, as you will be able to increase your 'hold' time and the number of repetitions you can do.

Toning up your stomach

Exercising your stomach muscles

You should start to tone up your stomach muscles as soon as you feel well enough.

Work the deep muscles first by following Stage 1. These muscles are very important as they reduce strain on your back and pelvic floor. Once they are strong, you can then progress on to Stage 2 to improve your outer muscles.

Remember

Don't try any strong exercises such as sit-ups or lifting both legs up when lying on your back - these may be harmful.

Stage 1

This stage exercises the deepest muscle in the stomach, which acts like a corset. It stabilises the spine and pelvis, helps flatten your stomach and draws in your waistline.
The deep stomach exercise

For the first six weeks after giving birth, you should exercise in a comfortable position - perhaps lying on your side as shown below.

1. Let your tummy sag! Breathe in gently.
2. As you breathe out, gently draw in the lower part of your stomach, squeezing your pelvic floor as well. Let go.

Don’t move your back at any time. You should be able to breathe and talk while you exercise. Repeat this movement four or five times, with a few seconds rest between each one. Aim to build up gradually - holding the muscles in for a maximum of 10 seconds and repeating up to 10 times.

After six weeks, you can progress to the position below.

Different starting positions to try:

Lying face down with a pillow under your stomach. Lying on your back with a pillow under your head, your knees bent and feet flat on the floor or bed.
Toning up your stomach

Remember
It is very important to use the deep stomach and pelvic floor muscles in everyday activities. Hold them in while carrying your baby, lifting baby equipment and during housework. This reduces the strain on your back and pelvic floor muscles.

Stage 2
Once you are comfortably achieving the deep stomach exercise, you can move on to Stage 2 of the programme.

The pelvic tilt
1. Lie in the position shown and perform the deep stomach exercise.
2. Gently squeeze your pelvic floor and buttocks, tilt your pelvis up and flatten your back on to the floor or bed. Hold this position for a maximum of 10 seconds, then release gently.

Remember
Keep your stomach flat. If it bulges out, then go back to Stage 1 and try Stage 2 again in a few days' time.