



# Postpartum Fitness

Getting back in shape after your pregnancy

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While pregnancy and birth can be joyful, they also can be hard on your body.

To regain the level of fitness you had before you became pregnant, you'll need to pace yourself, set realistic goals, and maintain a regular exercise routine.

## **When to begin exercising**

If you exercised during your pregnancy and had a normal vaginal birth, you can start slow to moderate walking, and the exercises in this booklet, as soon as you feel able. After about 6 weeks, your doctor will probably advise that you can start to resume your regular exercise routine. After a C-section, most doctors recommend waiting 6 to 8 weeks to do anything more than easy walking.

Your body changed in many ways during pregnancy, so exercise in the first weeks and months after childbirth will be different than before you were pregnant. Pregnancy hormones have made your joints and ligaments loose, so you will need to be extra careful to avoid injury. With the added fatigue of newborn care, you should return to normal exercise gradually.

- **Starting out:** Your first and most important goal is to start restoring your pelvic floor muscles and your core abdominal muscles. These muscles support the spine and pelvic girdle and may help prevent urinary incontinence. While doing the exercises, keep your pelvic floor and stomach muscles contracted. Focus on using the proper positions rather than how intensely you do the exercises.
- **Finding the time:** Set aside time each day for exercise. Even 10 or 15 minutes here and there while the baby naps is a good beginning. You can also take the baby for short walks in a front pack carrier or stroller.
- **Breathing:** During exercise, it's important to breathe easily but deeply. If you find yourself holding your breath while exercising, slowly breathe in through your nose as if to smell the roses and out through your mouth as if to blow out candles, to encourage correct breathing.

# AEROBIC AND PELVIC FLOOR EXERCISES

## Aerobic exercise

The best aerobic exercise to start with is walking. Within days of a normal vaginal delivery, you can start taking slow, 15 to 20 minute walks. In the following weeks, you can pick up the pace and the length of your walks. When you reach the 6-week postpartum mark, you should be able to start more vigorous or lengthy aerobic activities.

## Pelvic floor strengthening (kegels)

To regain pelvic floor strength, you should do a minimum of 40 to 60 pelvic floor contractions each day. You need to do both long holding and quick contractions.

### Holding contractions

Contract the pelvic floor muscles by closing the vaginal and rectal openings, as if to hold in urine and gas, and lift inward. Hold for 5 to 10 counts. Repeat 10 times.

### Quick contractions

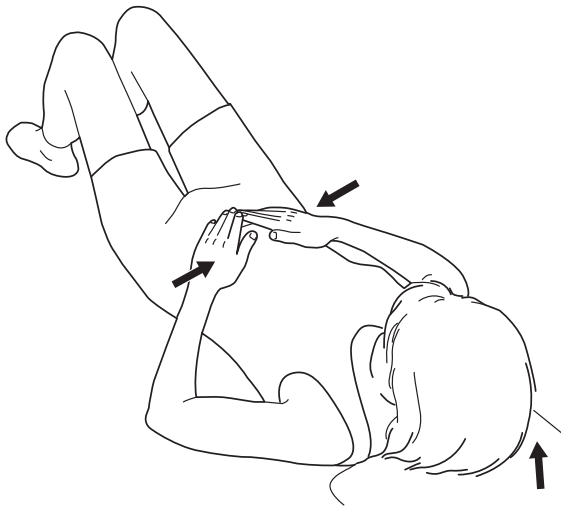
Using the same strategy as above, try to quickly contract the pelvic floor muscles 5 times in 5 seconds. This is one repetition. Repeat 10 times.



**TIP:** Doing pelvic floor exercises every time you feed your baby will help you regain your pelvic floor strength.

### Before doing abdominal exercises...

Before beginning abdominal exercises be sure you don't have a separation of your abdominal muscles known as a "diastasis recti." You can check this yourself by lying on your back with knees bent and feet flat on the bed or floor. Put your fingers about a hand's width above and below the belly button. Now raise your head and curl up until your shoulder blades lift off the bed or floor. If the abdominal muscles gap more than 2 finger widths apart, you could have diastasis recti, and should talk with your Ob/Gyn clinician before doing abdominal muscle exercises.

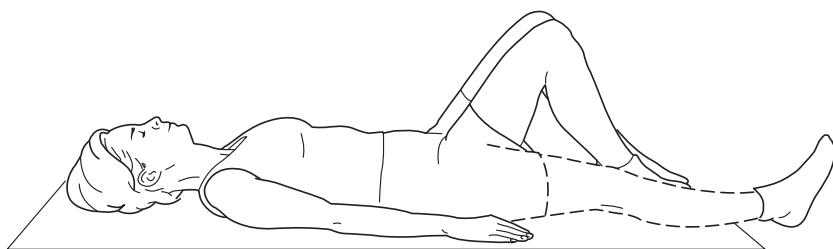


## Beginning abdominal exercises

While traditional sit-ups or curl-ups have their place in an abdominal strengthening program, often the more important lower abdominal muscles are neglected. The following exercise progression focuses on the lower abdominal muscles.

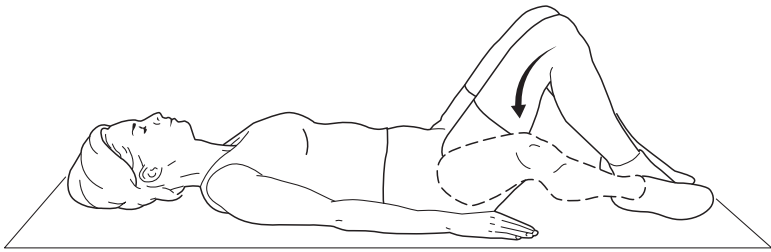
### One leg heel slide

Lie on your back with knees bent. Contract pelvic floor and abdominal muscles as you slowly slide one heel away from your body until your leg is straight. Relax. Contract muscles again as you slide your heel back to the start position. Begin with 10 repetitions on each side and work up to 20 to 30 repetitions.



### Single leg fall out

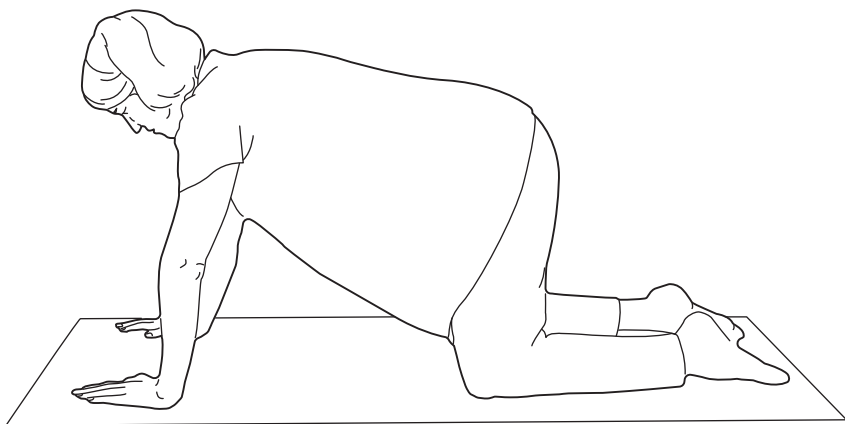
Lie on your back with knees bent, hip-width apart and feet flat on floor. Breathe in. As you breathe out, contract your pelvic floor muscles and let one leg fall out to the side. Do a pelvic floor contraction and bring leg back to the starting position. Begin with 10 repetitions on each leg and work up to 20. When you can do 20 with each leg, begin to do both legs together. Start with 10 and work up to 20.



## ABDOMINAL STRENGTHENING

### On hands and knees

On your bed or a flat surface, get into a hands-and-knees position so that your posture is aligned with hands under shoulders and knees below hips. Maintain the normal curve of your low back. Breathe in and as you breathe out contract your pelvic floor muscles and gently pull abdominal muscles toward spine. Begin with 10 repetitions, holding 5 seconds. Increase to 2 sets of 10 repetitions, holding 10 seconds.





## More advanced abdominal exercises

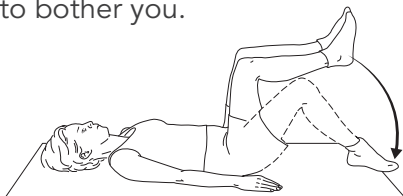
### One leg extension

Lie on your back, knees bent, feet flat on the floor. Contract your pelvic floor muscles and gently pull in abdominal muscles below belly button while breathing normally. Now lift one foot to straighten your leg and hold it at the height of the bent knee, parallel to the floor. Be sure that your hips stay still and your belly remains flat during the exercise. Hold this position for a count of 5. Return your leg to the bent position. Relax your abdominal and pelvic floor muscles. Repeat with your other leg. Begin with 10 repetitions working to 20 each leg.



### Toe tapping

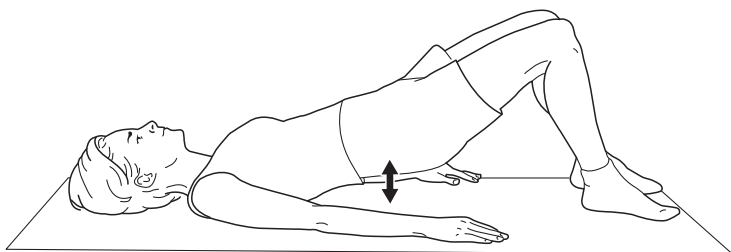
Contract your pelvic floor muscles. Pull your belly button in toward your spine. Lift one leg toward your chest. Keeping your belly flat and your low back still (no arching), lift the other leg toward your chest. Touch one leg to the floor and bring it back up toward your chest. Touch the other leg to the floor and bring it back up toward your chest. Repeat this cycle 20 times. Stop and rest if your back begins to bother you.



## HIP AND BACK STRENGTHENING

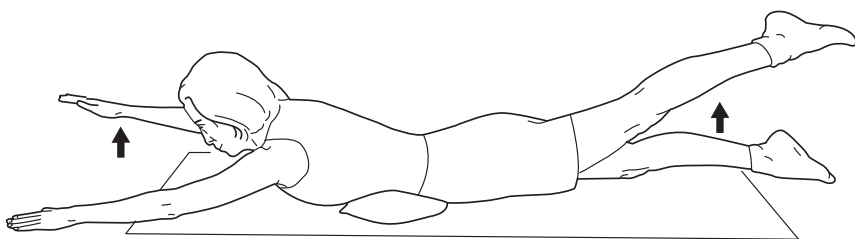
### Bridging

Lie on your back with knees bent. Contract pelvic floor and pull abdominal muscles in toward spine. Tighten your buttock muscles as you lift hips a hand's width off bed or floor. Hold for a count of 5. Repeat 10 times. Remember to maintain normal breathing.



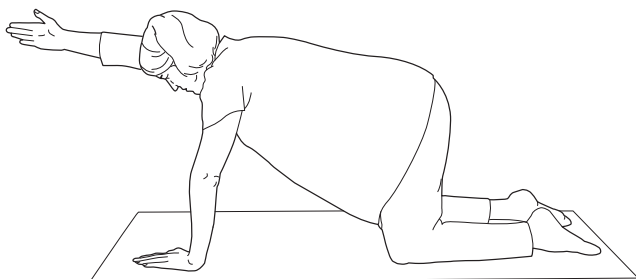
### Arm and leg lifts

To begin, put a pillow under your stomach to support your low back. Contract pelvic floor muscles and pull abdominal muscles in toward spine. Lift one arm 1 to 2 inches off the floor or bed, hold for 5 seconds. Repeat 10 times. Then lift one leg ½ to 1 inch off the floor or bed, hold for 5 seconds. Repeat 10 times. When this is easy, combine lifting the opposite arm and leg together.



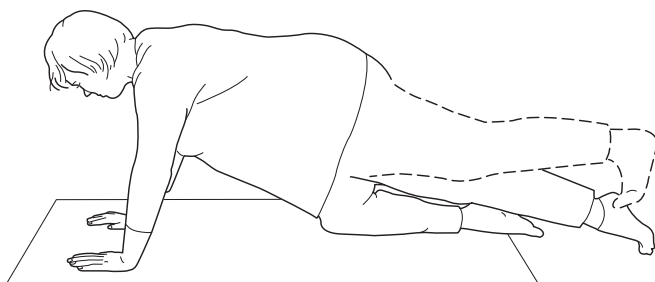
## Hands and knees

Position yourself so that your knees are hip-width apart and hands are under your shoulders. Keep your back in a flat spine or neutral position (avoid arching or sagging). Lift one arm in front of you, hold for a count of 5.



Then switch. Lift your other arm. Only your arm should move. Your weight should stay evenly distributed. Repeat 10 times.

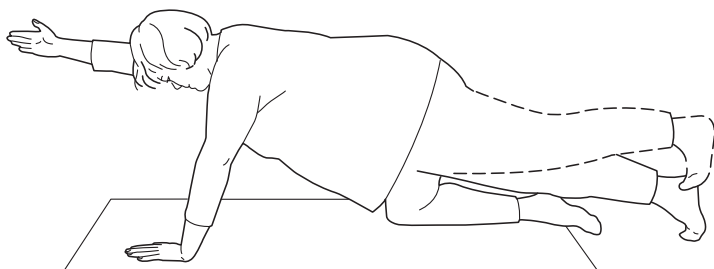
Now extend your leg behind you while taking care to maintain a neutral spine.



Hold for a count of 5. Move to the other leg. Only your leg should move. Your weight should stay evenly distributed. Repeat 10 times.

## HIP AND BACK STRENGTHENING

Now raise opposite arm and leg together while maintaining a neutral spine.



**Tip:** If you find yourself falling over or if this bothers your back, you are not ready for this exercise.

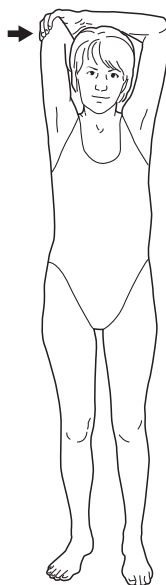
### Shoulder blade squeeze

Clasp your hands behind your back. Pull shoulder blades down and back. Hold for 5 seconds. Repeat 10 times.



### Pectoral stretch

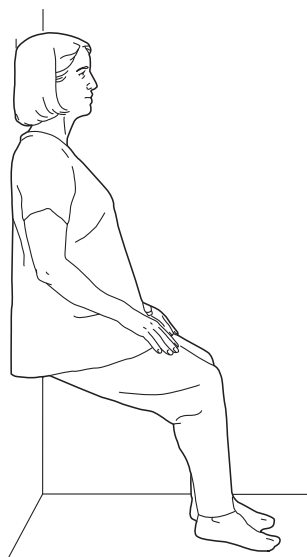
Bring both arms overhead, pull one elbow back as far as possible (without pain). Hold for 5 seconds. Repeat 10 times.



## EXERCISES FOR SHOULDERS AND LEGS

### Wall sit

Stand leaning against a wall with your feet hip-distance apart, 1 or 2 feet away from the wall. Slowly slide your back down the wall so that your knees are bent at about a 90-degree angle. When moving up and down the wall, take care that knees track over second toe, and avoid letting knees roll in or out during movement. You'll look as if you're sitting on an invisible chair. Hold yourself in this position for 20 to 30 seconds and repeat 3 to 5 times. Slowly increase the length of time you hold the position.

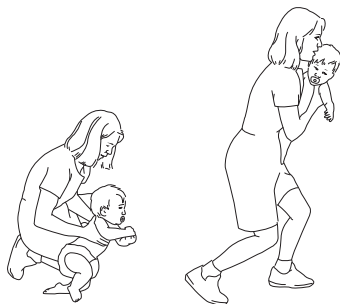


### Heel raises

Stand normally with feet shoulder width apart. Then gently rise up on toes and roll back on heels. Repeat 10 times.

## USING AND MOVING YOUR BODY

To help the transition back to your “old self,” use the same care when moving as you did when you were pregnant. Remember your posture. Gently contract your pelvic floor and lower abdominal muscles to help you support your spine and restore normal posture. Keep your head level and take care to avoid extending your spine.

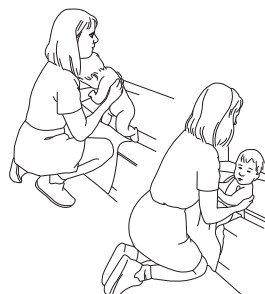


### Picking up from floor

Squat down to pick up baby and bring baby close before standing up. Use knees and keep back straight.

### In and out of tub

Squat or kneel down close to edge of the tub to lower child into tub or to lift out. Be sure there is a safety mat inside the tub.



### In and out of car

Stand close and keep back straight. Bend knees to put baby in or take baby out of car seat.



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This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor. If you are hit, hurt, or threatened by a partner or spouse, this can seriously affect your health. There is help. Call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233 or connect to [ndvh.org](http://ndvh.org).

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