

SHAPE

Forget all the celebrity new mothers obsessed with losing their baby fat. Will Kwatia reveals how you can do it sensibly

UP



Mother & Baby Picture Library

After giving birth, getting your body back into shape may be high on your wish list, but it's far better to take things slowly and exercise little but often. Try to avoid so-called "miracle" diets that many celebrities embark on soon after the birth of their child. Remember, we're all different and some things work for one person and not for another.

Finding the time, let alone the energy, to exercise with a baby in tow can be hard, but try to get into an exercise routine as soon as possible.

If you have had a Caesarean delivery, you shouldn't lift anything in the first few weeks and you will need to take extra precautions with other forms of exercise. Gentle walking may be your best option at this stage, but speak to your midwife or health visitor for advice.

If you have had a vaginal delivery, try brisk walks and, if you belong to a gym, look at exercise classes available and whether there are crèche facilities you can use. Always tell your instructor that you have recently given birth.

If a gym membership is out of the question, this shouldn't stop you from being active as there are many things you can do at home. Wherever you exercise, remember to always discuss your fitness plan with your midwife first.

The following are some ideas you can incorporate into your routine:

WARM-UP

Start with the lower muscle groups then the larger ones (such as the muscles in the lower leg then the thighs) and slowly move upwards. Try:

- Ankle movements (toe to heel)
- Knee lifts

- Flicking your heels up to your bottom
- Rotating your shoulders to the front then to the back, then make each of these movements larger as you go

STEP-UPS

- Step up and down a flight of stairs: left up, right up, left down, right down.
- Ensure the whole foot goes onto the step and stand up straight, squeezing your buttocks as you do so
- Make sure you land toe then heel. You can alternate the lead leg or the speed

JOGGING/WALKING

- This can provide a great cardio workout which would lead to getting back into a more formal exercise routine – and baby can come too, in the buggy.
- Work out a route around where you live. Time yourself and keep a record of how you are doing.

SWIMMING

- A great way to improve your stamina and, again, baby can come too. Many local leisure centres have special classes for parents and babies.

GARDENING

- Simple but effective. Think about the different positions you will have to get your body into and also the time your body is in that position. However, as with all things, err on the side of caution.

PELVIC FLOOR MUSCLES

Remember, your body has gone through huge changes so you should not rush into exercise too soon, especially not without adequate information and help. This is particularly important if you had a Caesarean section, an episiotomy

(surgical cutting of the perineum) or any tearing of the perineum during birth. Even if you haven't, ensure the pelvic floor muscles are worked back to normal safely and efficiently before embarking on any vigorous exercise.

Pelvic floor muscles support the vagina, uterus, bladder and rectum. During pregnancy fluctuating hormones soften these tissues, making urinary problems more likely later in life – even if you have had a Caesarean section. Keeping muscles strong reduces problems you may incur after delivery, such as urinary stress incontinence (leakage of urine when you laugh, sneeze, cough or jump) or a prolapse of the rectum, vagina or uterus (when these organs sag below the pelvic floor).

To strengthen your pelvic floor, think of the squeeze you would do to stop a flow of urine mid-stream. When you first start doing the exercises, squeeze the muscles, hold for 10 seconds, then release. Repeat five or 10 times a session and try to do three or four sessions a day. Gradually build up to 25 times in each of your four sessions (ie: 100 10-second squeezes daily).

The best bit is that you can do these exercises sitting, standing or lying down and at any time of the day – they won't disrupt your normal routine.

ABDOMINAL MUSCLES

The abdominals help us attain correct posture when standing, sitting or moving. If weak, they can contribute to problems such as chronic lower back pain, shoulder and knee pain. After pregnancy, restoring strength to your abdominal muscles is especially important. Try these exercises:



Follow a sensible exercise regime and you'll soon regain your pre-birth shape



Drawing in

- Stand or sit
- Take a deep breath in and, as you breathe out, pull your belly button in. You should feel those muscles tighten
- If you have had perineal problems try this exercise in a bath of warm water as this will help soothe any pain

Foot slide

- Lie on your back, gently pushing your back into the floor
- Try and hold this position and slide your foot slowly forward as far as you can comfortably go

Table top

- Go onto your hands and knees, keeping them shoulder-width apart
- Imagine you are a table top and there is a glass of water on each shoulder and on each hip
- Gently pull in your belly button and reach out in front of you with one arm; hold for about five seconds
- To create an advanced version of this, eventually progress to using one arm and the opposite leg

Reverse curls

- Lie on your back with your feet up in the air and your knees not quite fully bent
- Ensure your lower back is in contact with the ground at all times and your belly button is pulled into your spine
- Now think about folding and unfolding your belly button so your legs gently rock backwards and forwards. This works your lower abdominal muscles

Getting your body back into shape should be for the long term, not the short term. It should also be fun: if you enjoy it, you're more likely to stick with it.

Better still, include your family in your exercise regime – and always listen to your body to know when to stop. ■