

# Ask the physiotherapist

## FLEXIBILITY AFTER PREGNANCY

**Q** What exercise would you recommend for improving flexibility after giving birth?

**A** The main emphasis, post-birth, should be on building stability rather than flexibility. Joints remain loose and less stable after the effects of the hormone relaxin in the third trimester, and it can take up to six months after the birth for the ligaments to firm up again. Overstretching these loose joints can cause pain and injury.

Current evidence suggests that as long as your pregnancy and delivery were uncomplicated, mild exercise such as walking, postural awareness work and pelvic floor exercises can begin almost immediately after the birth.

After six weeks (with uncomplicated delivery) or ten weeks (post Caesarean section) aerobic exercise, like swimming, low impact aerobics or cycling, is vital for regaining general fitness and losing excess body fat. A Pilates or yoga class can begin at this stage too, which will bring in flexibility work, but only with an instructor trained specifically in postnatal care.

## POST PREGNANCY BACK PAIN

**Q** I have never suffered with back problems but since I gave birth my back really hurts. What can I do to alleviate this? It is making my life as a new mum a bit more troublesome.

**A** Postnatal lower back pain is quite common

and, in most cases, it responds quickly. The abdominal muscles act like a corset, giving support to the lower back. These muscles are overstretched and weak after the birth, resulting in decreased levels of support for the lower back, causing it to feel weak and sore. So what can you do?

- Sit with your back supported and your feet uncrossed and resting on the floor.
- Relax your upper body when you are feeding your baby; rest your baby on a pillow on your lap to bring him close to you to feed.
- Change your baby on a surface at waist-height to avoid bending over and straining your back.
- As your baby grows, avoid carrying him on one hip. This creates an imbalance of pressure through the lower back and pelvis.
- Change positions regularly; move from sitting to standing after every 20 to 30 minutes.
- Target the muscles that support your back and legs with gentle exercise, like walking or swimming.

## POST BIRTH INCONTINENCE

**Q** Since giving birth to my second baby I have had a few embarrassing incidents of incontinence. It seems to happen when I laugh or sneeze. What can I do to prevent this?

**A** Pelvic floor strengthening should be done by all women, regardless of how they delivered. The pelvic floor is like a hammock, supporting your bladder, uterus and

bowel. After supporting your growing uterus in pregnancy, these muscles need daily strengthening. Activate your pelvic floor now!

- Sit in a relaxed position.
- Squeeze your pelvic floor muscles as if trying to stop yourself from passing urine.
- You should feel a lift

upwards and tightening sensation around your bladder and vagina.

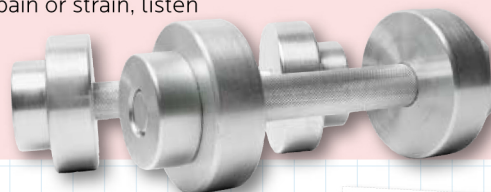
- Hold for three to five seconds and continue to breathe normally.
- As you get stronger, hold for ten seconds and alternate between slow and fast muscle contractions.

## IS LIFTING WEIGHTS SAFE?

**Q** I'm a member of a gym and prior to my pregnancy I lifted weights as part of my training. Is it safe to continue lifting weights during pregnancy?

**A** Weight training strengthens and tones your muscles and helps you build stamina, which certainly helps during labour and delivery. During pregnancy your fitness goals should be aimed at maintenance and not dramatic gains. It is usually safe to continue to lift weights during an uncomplicated pregnancy, but there are a few modifications that should be made:

- Show your obstetrician your training plan and have them confirm that it's safe for you to continue weight training.
- Avoid overloading the joints by lifting lighter weights than usual and performing more repetitions.
- Avoid the 'Valsalva' manoeuvre where you forcefully exhale but with your mouth closed. This can raise your blood and intra-abdominal pressure which may affect the flow of oxygen to your baby.
- Use resistance bands rather than free weights to avoid accidents and to facilitate slow, controlled movements.
- After the first trimester, don't lift weights lying on your back; this position puts pressure on the large vena cava vein, which may decrease blood flow to the brain and uterus.
- If you feel any pain or strain, listen to your body and reduce your training programme.



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