



Preparing for Pregnancy

A Good Start

Now that you have decided to have a baby, your excitement is probably mounting. But before you begin, you should take advantage of the time you have to prepare your body for pregnancy. By providing your baby-to-be with an optimal environment – your fit and healthy body – you will also be giving your baby a good start in life. Because having a baby also means major lifestyle changes, both you and your partner can also use this preparation time to ready yourselves emotionally for this momentous event.

A Physical

Now is the time to see your doctor for a thorough physical examination. Getting a physical before you plan to conceive can help detect any health problems which may require treatment before you get pregnant, or additional monitoring during your pregnancy.

The Pre-Pregnancy Exam

In addition to a physical check-up, ask your doctor or gynecologist to perform a pre-pregnancy exam. As part of this exam your doctor will most likely perform some of the following tests to check for the following:

- **Anemia.** If you are anemic, it's best to correct the problem before you conceive.
- **Protein or sugar in your urine.** These are possible signs of diabetes. If further testing does not confirm that you have diabetes, your doctor may want to closely monitor your pregnancy for the possible development of gestational diabetes.
- **Immunity to rubella (German measles).** This test will show whether you are immune to rubella, either because you have had the disease or have been vaccinated for it. Although rubella typically causes mild, flu-like symptoms, it can be particularly harmful for a developing fetus. If you are not immune to rubella, it's a good idea to get immunized first. Delay conceiving for three months after your immunization.
- **Toxoplasmosis.** You should be tested for toxoplasmosis if you have a cat or if you eat raw or rare meat or drink unpasteurized milk. Because immunity develops as a result of a previous infection,

take precautions if the tests indicate you are not immune. If you have a cat, for example, have someone else clean the litterbox. If you must do it yourself, make sure you wear gloves and wash your hands thoroughly afterwards. Toxoplasmosis is generally transmitted to cats when they eat raw meat or are exposed to the feces of other animals who carry the infection. Since soil can harbor animal feces, wear gloves whenever gardening. As well, you should avoid undercooked or raw meat and unpasteurized milk.

- **Immunity to other diseases.** If you haven't been immunized for measles, or you have tested negative for hepatitis B but are considered a high risk individual, you should consider getting immunized before you conceive.

As part of a pre-pregnancy exam your doctor will probably test you for many of these common conditions. If you do not receive one of these tests but would like to, don't hesitate to ask your doctor.

Visit Your Dentist

See your dentist for a thorough examination before you plan to conceive. This is the perfect time to get dental x-rays done and have necessary dental work performed. If you suspect you may be pregnant, however, you should avoid any dental x-rays until you know for certain that you are not. While the mild radiation of the x-rays will not hurt you, it may be harmful to a developing fetus.

Address Your Concerns with Your Doctor

Don't be afraid or embarrassed to ask your doctor any questions you may have about getting pregnant. Remember, your good health translates into a healthy baby. For example, if you smoke, now is the time to try to quit (see Hazard-Watch). Talk to your doctor about programs to help you quit smoking before you get pregnant. If there's a possibility that you may have been exposed to a sexually transmitted disease, ask your doctor for a test. It's always better to treat any medical problems before you conceive rather than having to take treatment during your pregnancy.

When to Stop Your Birth Control

If you are currently using the birth control pill, switch to another method of birth control – ideally a condom without spermicide. You should do this at least three months before you plan to conceive. If you are using spermicide, either on its own or with a diaphragm or a condom, it's a good idea to discontinue using it for about a month or six weeks before you plan to start a family.

Know Your Cycle

Now is the time to start keeping track of your menstrual cycle. If your periods come regularly, mark the beginning of each menstrual period on a calendar and see if you can pinpoint the days around which you ovulate. This will be your most fertile period and generally occurs about fourteen days before the start of your period. Signs of ovulation include:

- clear, jelly-like vaginal mucus
- your body temperature, taken daily, dips to its lowest level of the month before rising rapidly
- a bluish, rather than pinkish, cervix
- brief side or back pain

While some women experience signs of ovulation, many other women who ovulate just as regularly may not have any signs. If your cycles are regular, even if you don't show any signs of ovulation, your most fertile period will generally occur at around fourteen days prior to when you expect your period. If your cycles are irregular, home ovulation kits are available which can help you to determine when you are most fertile.

Take Your Vitamins

It's important that you begin taking a multi-vitamin supplement containing folic acid before you plan to conceive, preferably as soon as you discontinue using your current method of birth control. Studies have found that folic acid plays a large role in reducing the risk of a baby born with a neural-tube defect like spina bifida. Ask your doctor about a multi-vitamin supplement which has been formulated specifically for pregnancy. This type of supplement will not only ensure that you get adequate amounts of folic acid but also the vitamins and minerals your baby will need during the first few months of fetal development.

Weighing In

As you've probably guessed, pregnancy is not the ideal time to go on a diet. Try to achieve as close to your normal weight *before* you plan to conceive, if at all possible. Of course, you should aim for your optimal

weight using sensible dietary measures – using a crash diet to achieve your goal may result in your body lacking certain important nutrients during the first few months of your pregnancy.

Exercise Right

Beginning an exercise program, if you don't already exercise regularly, will help your body prepare for the challenges of pregnancy and labour. Try to stay cool during exercise, as overheating can cause increases in body temperature that can be dangerous. While most exercises are beneficial, you may want to avoid particularly strenuous exercise, which can interfere with your monthly cycle.

Hazard-Watch

You've seen your doctor. Your new and sensible diet is on track and you are approaching your optimal weight. You've noticed a difference in your muscle tone as a result of your exercise routine. But before you begin trying to conceive, you should be aware of the following hazards to conception and pregnancy:

- ***Smoking.*** You know the dangers of smoking, but did you know that smoking may also interfere with both your fertility and your partner's? Smoking during pregnancy will also expose your baby-to-be to a vast number of dangerous chemicals which have the potential to cause medical problems during pregnancy and childhood.
- ***Alcohol.*** While you are preparing your body for pregnancy, you can continue to have an occasional glass of wine – but avoid drinking heavily. Too much alcohol can actually disrupt your monthly cycle and interfere with your ability to conceive. When you do plan to conceive, you should stop drinking. Studies have shown that alcohol can be dangerous for the fetus, and a "safe" drinking limit has not yet been established for pregnant women.
- ***Medications.*** Before you begin trying to conceive, make sure to check with your doctor about the safety of any prescription medications you may be taking. Certain medications can cause birth defects. If you are taking medication that has been linked to birth defects, ask your doctor how long you should wait after discontinuing the medication before planning to start a family. Be cautious with over-the-counter medications, too. Many of these have warnings about usage during pregnancy, and it is always best to consult your doctor or pharmacist first.

The best route to take while you're trying to conceive is to treat your body as if you are already pregnant – after all, you very well may be!



The Postpartum Period

Those First Forty-Eight Hours

After the excitement and anticipation of labour and delivery, you and your baby are finally at home. Rather than feeling relieved and happy, you may find yourself overwhelmed by extreme anxiety and worry. Perhaps the following thoughts are running through your mind: "Is my baby getting enough milk?" "Am I breast-feeding correctly?" "Will I be a good mother?" "When will I get a good night's rest again?"

It helps to know that you're not alone with these feelings. The following words of advice from other new mothers may help:

1. You're not alone in feeling overwhelmed and anxious. You may also feel guilty about your feelings – after all, shouldn't you feel joyful and happy? Relax, these feelings are normal.
2. Get plenty of rest, whenever and wherever possible. Learn to nap when baby does.
3. You may feel too tired to have a nutritious meal or snack, but eating right is very important, especially if you are breast-feeding. You should also continue your prenatal/postpartum multi-vitamin and mineral supplement for at least three months.
4. Don't feel guilty about looking to your family and friends for support.
5. Take short breaks from the baby. Spend some time by yourself or with your family, not cleaning the house.

The "Blues"

In the first week postpartum you may find yourself feeling the "blues." Perhaps the feedings are not going well, or you're not getting enough sleep. You may have increasing doubts about your ability to cope with the 24-hour-a-day demands of mothering. You feel resentful – and guilty about the resentment – of being so tied down. Your partner seems just a little put out at all the time and attention you are lavishing on the baby. To top it off, you feel discouraged and weepy.

A number of factors contribute to these feelings of depression: hormones, fatigue, anxiety and fear about coping. Get as much rest as you can, and share your feelings with your partner. It's important that he understands the greater impact having a baby has on your life. It's also critical that you both work together to develop confidence in yourselves as parents.

Remember, not only is this postpartum state of mind very normal and common, it usually doesn't last long. In a week or two you and your partner will have become used to the new routine and the rewards of parenthood will become obvious. However, if you do continue to feel extremely anxious over long periods of time, it's important that you talk with your doctor.

Fatigue

Trying to take on too much, too soon, can exhaust you and make any emotional letdown even worse. It's important that you get the rest you need during the first two months after delivery. Try to alternate an hour of activity with an hour of resting with your feet up. Be a convalescent for the first week; pamper yourself for the next three weeks. By the end of the fourth week, you should be up to full activity, and in two months, you'll feel like yourself again.

Do's and Don'ts to Avoid Fatigue

Do get to bed early.

Don't have too many visitors the first week.

Don't climb stairs more than necessary.

Don't lift anything heavier than your baby.

Don't move furniture.

Do nap when your baby naps.

Do let your partner help with household chores, meals, and baby care.

Bathing

Showering and shampooing are fine any time after delivery, as long as you are steady on your feet. Many physicians prefer that you put off full tub baths until four to six weeks after delivery. But shallow baths in about four inches (10 cm) of warm water may be taken as soon as you get home. In fact, if you have uncomfortable stitches or hemorrhoids, such baths, also called sitz baths – three times a day, whether or not you are bleeding – are a soothing remedy.

Episiotomy Care

For cleanliness, keep a mild antiseptic solution in the bathroom. Use this to sponge the perineum (the area between the vagina and anus) after toilet use. Other than this, episiotomy wounds or perineal tears require no special care while they are healing unless they are painful. To relieve discomfort, take sitz baths (see above). Take ASA or acetaminophen. Apply an ice-collar between baths, or gauze soaked in ice-cold witch hazel.

Breast-feeding Worries

“How can I tell if my baby is getting enough milk?” This is a common question from new mothers who decide to breast-feed. With breast-feeding you can’t measure the amount of milk your baby gets at each feeding. You needn’t worry, however, as long as your baby continues soiling his or her diapers and gains weight steadily.

If you’re following the basics of breast-feeding your baby is most likely getting exactly the nutrition he or she requires for a good start in life:

1. Make sure both you and your baby are comfortable during the feeding.
2. Your baby should be latching onto both your nipple and the areola.
3. Watch for a rhythmic motion in your baby’s cheek. This is an indication that he or she is sucking properly.
4. Support your breast with the hand not holding your baby, but do not block the areola.
5. When baby is finished, break the suction by depressing your breast or placing your finger into the corner of your baby’s mouth.
6. Try to have your baby feed on both breasts during a feeding, even if it means gently removing your baby from one breast and having him or her re-latch onto the other one.

Menstruation

If you do not nurse your baby, you can expect to menstruate again within four to eight weeks. The first menstrual flow may be heavy and contain clots; it may start, stop and start again. The second period should be more or less normal. If you are nursing, the flow may not appear. But if it does, don’t worry. It will not interfere with nursing.

Contraception

Because of the wide choice of methods, as well as your individual needs and preference, plan to discuss contraceptive methods with your doctor during the first postpartum visit. The fitting of a diaphragm is usually postponed until the baby is about three months of age. Other methods of contraception can generally be used sooner.

Contrary to popular belief, the fact that you are nursing will not protect you from getting pregnant. Use a method of birth control, such as condoms and spermicide, during this time. Do not use birth control pills while breast-feeding.

Diet

Your doctor will tell you if you have any special diet needs. In general, you may eat anything you like, observing the guidelines of sensible nutrition. If you are breast-feeding, however, you will need about 1,000 calories a day more than usual and will probably need to drink a quart of milk daily. If you are nursing, you should also avoid alcohol and tobacco.

First Postpartum Visit

Unless you have a problem that requires seeing your doctor earlier, you should arrange for a follow-up examination no later than six weeks after the baby’s birth. At that time, your general physical condition will be checked, your urine tested, your breasts and abdominal wall examined and a thorough pelvic examination will be carried out. Six months after the baby’s birth, you should plan to have a Pap test and breast examination.

Postpartum Sex

Your doctor will advise you how long to wait before resuming sex (usually four to six weeks). Though you may well feel sexual desire before this period has elapsed, you would be wise to wait at least until after your first postpartum check-up. If you have had an episiotomy, intercourse may cause some discomfort at first. This can often be alleviated by a slight change of position, including the use of a pillow to raise the hips. Any other problems or questions concerning the resumption of sex should be talked over with your doctor. He is the best qualified individual to counsel you.

How to Care for Your Back

The changes that took place in your body during pregnancy may have put undue strain on your back. Now is the time to learn how to care for your back to avoid unnecessary back discomfort in the future.

Never bend from the waist without bending the knees. Avoid any position in which your back is arched. Carry packages and baby high, close to your chest. Never twist your body to lift an object or baby up or down; face them squarely. In general, when seated, it is restful to the back to have the knees higher than the hips. You'll also find a rocking chair restful, as the back and forth motion changes the groups of muscles used.

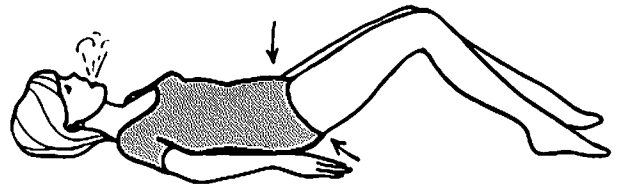


Exercise

You will naturally be concerned about your untuned stomach muscles. Your doctor may give you a set of exercises to do which will help strengthen the abdominal muscles (and help return your uterus to its normal position). If he doesn't, a good way to tighten and tone these muscles is to hold your stomach in. Practice pulling it in while you take several natural breaths; then relax. Repeat this throughout the day and make it a permanent habit. You will be surprised how effectively this simple practice restores muscle springiness and flattens your stomach.

11 Exercises after pregnancy

Now more than ever toning and strengthening your muscles is important. Start by doing the first exercise and then add one exercise each day. Be sure to check your posture and to breathe properly - exhaling when contracting muscles, inhaling when relaxing. Including time for exercising in your busy schedule now will make you feel better and help you get back into shape. Repeat each exercise 4 times daily, then build up to 10 or more, doing each as many times as you feel comfortable with for a period of a month to 6 weeks before progressing to more active exercising. Proceed more gradually if you have had a caesarean delivery. Check with your doctor concerning when it's best to start exercising.



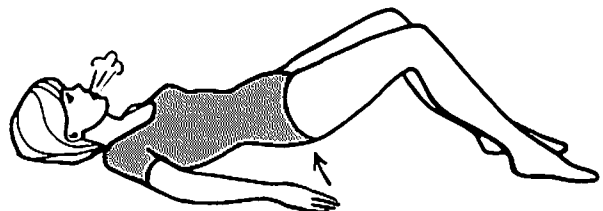
1. *Pelvic tilt* - Lying on your back, hands at your sides and knees bent, tilt your pelvis up by tightening your stomach muscles and flattening your back onto the floor. Blow out while pulling in your stomach muscles and pressing the curve of the lower back into the floor. Hold tightly. Relax as you breathe in. Repeat. Do this in other positions as well, such as standing and sitting to help your posture and relieve backache.



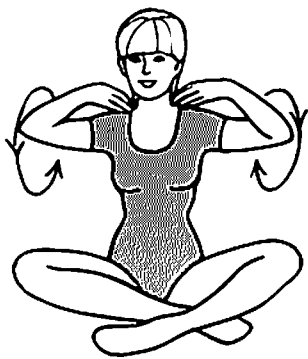
2. *Pelvic floor* - Sitting comfortably cross-legged on the floor, concentrate on tightening the muscles between your legs. Hold each contraction for 2 seconds. Release then repeat.

- Contract the front of the pelvic floor as you do to stop urinating by pulling in your abdominal muscles and squeezing the buttocks.
- Contract the middle of the pelvic floor by pulling up inside the vagina, then slowly let it down and release. (Don't hold your breath as you do this).
- Contract around the back passage (anus).
- Lastly, pull up all three together.

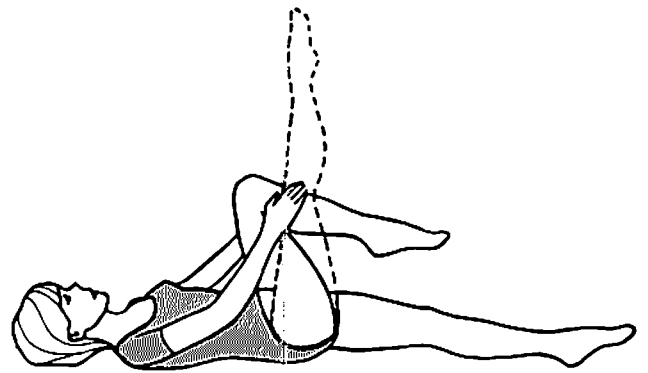
Do these exercises throughout the day, sitting or standing. They will aid in the healing of your episiotomy (incision of the vulva) as well as improving bladder and vaginal control. Do them as often as you can for the rest of your life!



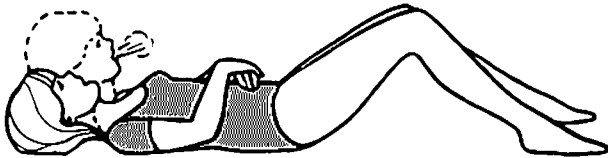
3. *Bridging* - Lying with your knees bent and arms at your sides for stability, contract your buttocks and stomach and breathe out as you raise your hips a few inches off the floor; hold, then slowly lower as you breathe in, relax. Repeat.



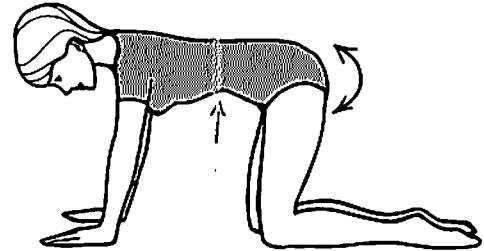
4. Shoulder circles – Placing your fingers on your shoulders circle your arms back, making small then larger circles. Repeat for 4 sets of four. (This exercise is good for posture and tired shoulders).



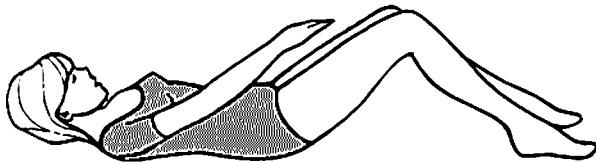
8. Leg stretch – Lying on your back, bring one knee up toward your chest holding it in your hands. Then straighten the leg moving your hands to hold your calf (if you can). Hold. Return the leg down by bending at the knee, then straightening it on the floor. Repeat with the other leg. Repeat again with a flexed foot.



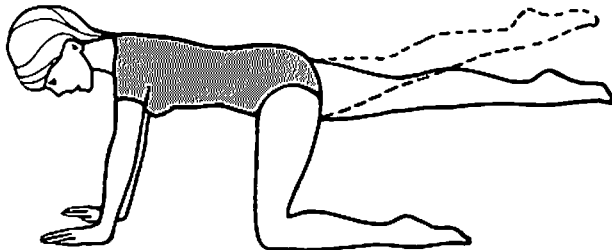
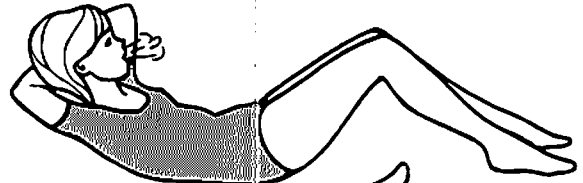
5. Strong stomach – Lie flat on your back with your knees bent. Cross your hands over your stomach to support it. Breathe in, then curl up, raising your head and shoulders off the floor as you breathe out. Slowly lower as you breathe in. Repeat. (Proper breathing is essential. In any exercise be sure to breathe out as you tighten muscles and breathe in when relaxing muscles).



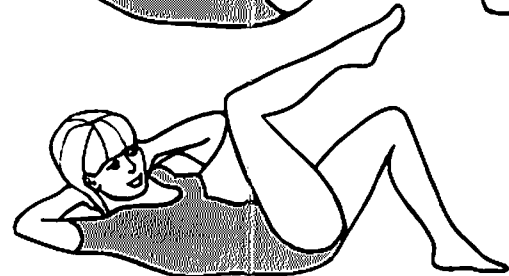
9 Pelvic tilt/Hip sway – Kneeling on all fours, hold your back flat (without sagging), head level, tighten the stomach muscles by pulling them in and upwards. Tighten buttocks, and arch your back. Slowly relax. Repeat again slowly. To stretch each side, simply sway your hip left while turning your head to the left, then repeat the same thing to the right. Repeat. (These exercises can provide relief for lower back pain while strengthening stomach muscles).



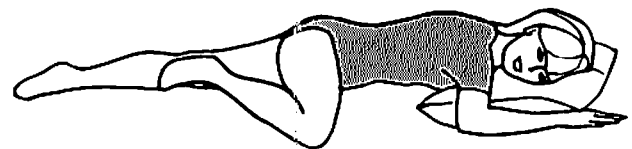
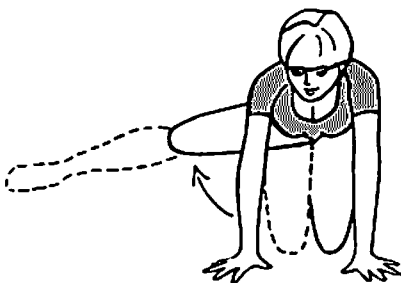
6. Diagonal curl ups – Lying with your legs bent, raise your head and then reach for (but not necessarily touch) your left knee with your right hand. Repeat, using your right knee and left hand. As with all these exercises, *don't forget to breathe out* as you come up and contract your abdominal muscles and breathe in when you relax them.



7. Leg lifts back and side – Staying on all fours, raise one leg straight out behind until parallel to the floor, then lower the leg and bend it keeping the movement continuous and controlled. Keep your head down, and your back straight by keeping your stomach in and avoid raising the buttocks. Repeat with the other leg. Then, on all fours, raise one knee to the side, straighten the leg, then bend it and return to starting position. Repeat with the other leg.



10. Head lift/Diagonal curl-ups – Lying on your back, knees bent with arms bent behind your head, keep your chin up and raise your upper body. Be sure to keep your bent arms back. Raise your head and the upper part of your body just a few inches as you breathe out, then slowly lower your head breathing in. Repeat. Next lift knee and shoulder and curl to one side, bringing opposite elbow to knee, repeat on the other side.



11. Relax – Relaxing the muscles you've worked is an important exercise in itself, so be sure to follow any exercising by cooling down. Lying down, in a relaxed position, alternately tighten and release all the muscle groups in your body working from feet to head. Remember to breathe in and out slowly and evenly. Then relax your whole body.