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a resource for breastfeeding moms

A Publication of the International
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Physical Activity: Part of Your Healthy Lifestyle

By Kelly Spowman, Jane Heinig, PhD, IBCLC, and Kara Ishii, MSW

Exercise can be a scary word. Who has time for exercise after having a baby? You do! The trick is making activity a part of your daily routine. With all the news about the importance of physical activity, you might be confused about getting started and wondering how becoming more active might affect you and your baby. Your lactation consultant wants you to have the facts so you can make the best decisions for yourself and your family.

Have you heard:

› *“It’s not safe to be active after having a baby?”*

The truth...

After your baby is born, you will need time to recover from the changes in your body brought on by pregnancy and childbirth, but **as soon as your doctor agrees you can gradually introduce gentle activities** (like walking and pelvic tilts). You can increase your activity as long as you are comfortable, keeping in mind that everyone is different and some women will need to take more time (especially those who have had a c-section or complications during labor and delivery). When exercise is introduced slowly and gently, it is perfectly safe for new mothers.

› *“Exercise affects my milk. My baby won’t want to nurse?”*

The truth...

Studies have shown that **exercise does not affect your milk supply**. Women who exercise will make as much milk with all the same nutrients as women who don’t exercise at all. These same studies show that women who exercise and watch their diet will lose more fat than women who just count calories. In one small study, babies were more likely to reject their mother’s milk (offered in droppers) after their mothers had exercised as hard as they possibly could. However, several more recent studies have shown that babies take the same amount of milk, grow, and develop just as well whether or not their mothers exercised regularly.

› *“New mothers don’t have time to be active?”*

A walk around the block* can...

Help you shed those pounds you gained while you were pregnant.

Give you **more energy** to get through the day.

Strengthen your heart and reduce your lifelong risk for disease.

Relieve stress and tension.

Boost your mood and make you feel more confident.

Keep your bones and muscles strong.

*Three 10-minute bouts of exercise are just as effective as one 30-minute bout of exercise!

FACT: When you diet and exercise, **nearly 100%** of the weight you lose is fat! But...if you just diet, **only 60%** of your weight loss is fat!**

**McCrorry et al. *Am J Clin Nutr.* 1999; 69: 959-967.



Make it happen!

- › **Discuss** your plans with your doctor.
- › **Set** realistic short-term and long-term goals.
- › **Recruit** your family and friends to help you with ideas, motivation, support, and childcare. You can't do it all on your own.
- › For your comfort, **breastfeed** your baby before you exercise and wear a good sports bra.
- › **Drink** plenty of water before, during, and after your activity.
- › **Remember** to pace yourself, especially if you were inactive during your pregnancy. Be sure to take time to recover and rest.
- › A **fitness plan** should include:
 - **aerobic exercises** like walking or biking, which strengthen your lungs and heart
 - **weight lifting** to strengthen your muscles and bones
 - **stretching** to increase your flexibility and improve your circulation
- › For **ideas** in making your fitness plan, contact your doctor or a fitness professional at your gym or community recreation program.
- › **Be creative** and involve your child in your activities. Many community recreation programs include postpartum yoga and Strollerobics. Find out what's available in your area.
- › No time to be active *and* spend time with family and friends? **Team up** with them for fun, support, and companionship while you explore new activities.

The truth...

Adding activity to your day can be as simple as chasing your toddler, walking the dog, vacuuming, gardening, or unloading groceries. If a long workout won't fit into your schedule, try short bouts of activity like **climbing stairs or taking a brisk walk around the block**. Taking a brisk walk around the block can be as good as time spent on a treadmill.

› *“Physical activity is too expensive; gym memberships, childcare, and home equipment cost too much”?*

The truth...

Good shoes are a must, but **you don't need expensive or fancy equipment to improve your fitness**. Many exercises such as sit-ups and lunges take no equipment at all. Try these helpful tips:

- Rather than weights, you can use plastic bottles filled with water to perform your strength routines.
- Holding on to a sturdy kitchen chair while doing leg lifts works well.
- Beach towels can be used instead of mats for your yoga practice.

If you do choose to purchase exercise equipment, remember that your children's safety comes first. Never leave your baby unsupervised. Teach your older children that the equipment is not a toy. If possible, keep your equipment away from your children in a room that is off limits or kept locked.

Too much too soon?

As with anyone, overdoing it can be dangerous. If you experience any of the following, you need to stop your workout and contact your doctor:

- Persistent pain, injury, or chest pain
- Increased or changes in postpartum discharge
- Persistent headaches, faintness, or dizziness
- Rapid heart rate that persists after exercise



For **free women's health information**, call 1-800-994-WOMAN (1-800-994-9662). For tips on getting started go to <http://www.familydoctor.org/handouts/015.html>.

Make every day count, don't put off improving your health. **By breastfeeding, you're already giving your baby the best start possible; do the same for yourself.** Keep at it, don't worry if you skip a day or make mistakes. By making fitness a part of your lifestyle, you'll be healthier and have more energy. Make it fun for the whole family and you'll be starting your child off on the right track to better health. >