



Physical Activity for Mothers of New Babies and Toddlers



Planning to start doing some physical activities 6 weeks after giving birth will help promote gradual weight loss. You can progress in a reasonable way to a moderate level of physical exercise during the month or two that follow.

As you increase your physical activity level, make sure to eat and drink enough so that you have some energy left at the end of your day. You should be aiming to build endurance, strength and flexibility through the activities that you do.

Building Endurance

Walking is one of the safest and easiest forms of endurance activity for new mothers and their babies.

You may find it difficult (while breastfeeding and caring for your baby) to find the time to be active, have time for yourself,

and enjoy the company of other adults. Walking with your baby in a stroller or an approved carrier allows you to do three things at once: do a physical activity, take time for yourself, and enjoy being with friends! The FITT Chart below provides guidelines for being active in the first 6 weeks after pregnancy.

FITT Chart

EXERCISE GUIDELINES FOR ENDURANCE ACTIVITIES DURING THE FIRST 6 WEEKS AFTER CHILDBIRTH (adapted from PARmed-X for PREGNANCY, Prescription for Aerobic Activity)			
F	I	T	T
FREQUENCY	INTENSITY	TIME	TYPE
<p>If it is difficult to find the time to be active. Try physical activities you can do with your baby, such as walking.</p> <p>Most new mothers can do low-level physical activities such as walking daily.</p> <p>If you are keen to get back into shape and want to begin an exercise program in addition to your active lifestyle, begin with endurance activities 3 times a week. Progress to 4 or 5 times per week during the next six weeks.</p>	<p>Listen to your body. If you feel comfortable doing what you're doing, you are on target.</p> <p>If you have had an episiotomy (stitches), make sure you can walk or sit comfortably before you begin exercise that is more vigorous.</p> <p>During the first 6 weeks after childbirth, do only LOW to MODERATE INTENSITY exercise. Your body needs time to recover from the trauma of childbirth. Use the Borg Scale or the Talk Test to track the intensity of your efforts!</p>	<p>Attempt 15 minutes at a time, even if it means that you reduce the intensity to a light or weak Level.</p> <p>Short rest times (intervals) may be helpful in the first few weeks.</p>	<p>Do continuous exercises for large muscle groups, such as walking.</p> <p>You may want to avoid activities that involve sitting, such as cycling, rowing or water activities because of healing taking place in the pelvic region.</p> <p>If you had a caesarean section, you will need to wait for your stitches to heal before you do physical activities that use your abdominal muscles to a great extent (such as rowing or skiing). You may have to wait for 10 weeks or more for your abdominal wall to heal. Start slowly. If it hurts you are NOT ready!</p>

Monitor your progress with a Healthy Habits Log

- Feelings of well-being
- Weight loss
- Energy levels
- Hydration
- Dietary intake

If you are not meeting your fitness or weight loss goals, you may need to adjust the frequency, duration, and intensity of your efforts.

If taking an exercise class:

- Make sure you can see the instructor.
- Do what the instructor says to do with body alignment and positions.
- Pay attention to keeping a neutral spine.
- Keep your knees bent and soft.
- Go at your own pace!

The Talk Test

If you can talk to someone during your activity, you are in the correct effort zone. If you are working so hard that you cannot talk - other than gasping a few words at a time - you are at an intensity level that is too high so soon after giving birth. You need to REDUCE your intensity!

The BORG Scale of Perceived Exertion

This scale uses numbers to rate how you perceive the level of effort (or intensity) of the physical activity you are doing. Ask yourself how hard you are working. For the first 6 weeks after childbirth, your strongest physical activity should be NO HIGHER than a BORG 11 to 14 (moderate to strong intensity of perceived effort).

Intensity of Perceived Effort	Rating	What is my breathing like?
No effort at all	6	Resting
Very, very light effort	7	No change from resting
Very light effort	8	No change from resting
Somewhat light effort	9, 10	Slight increase in breathing rate
Fairly light effort	11, 12	Greater increase in breathing rate, can sing a song!
Somewhat hard effort	13, 14	Greater increase in breathing rate, can sing a song!
Hard effort	15, 16	Starting to feel out of breath, can talk but cannot sing a song
Very hard effort	17, 18, 19	More out of breath, can say only a few words at a time
Very, very hard effort	20	Completely out of breath

Building Strength

It is important to tone muscles that were stretched when you were pregnant and during childbirth. For muscle strengthening exercise ideas please go to: www.caaws.ca/mothersinmotion/e/baby/activity_strength_muscular.cfm

Protect your joints

It takes about 12 weeks for looseness in your joints and ligaments caused by pregnancy to return to normal. Breastfeeding mothers may notice that their joints seem as loose as they were during pregnancy—or maybe even looser. Ligaments may

be relaxed because of some of the hormones linked to breast-feeding. In order to protect your joints as you work on building your strength, begin with muscular strengthening exercises that you can do at home with your baby. Take 3- 4 months to progress to muscular strength activities that involve free weights or weight machines.

These are some ways to focus in on specific muscle groups.

- Strengthen your legs but keep your knees bent. They are your “shock absorbers.”
- Maintain your back in neutral alignment.
- Strengthen your stomach muscles but make sure that your stitches and abdominal wall are healed FIRST.
- Strengthen your chest, shoulders, and back to help support your bigger breasts!
- Begin with muscular strengthening exercises that you can do at home with your baby.

Do Kegel exercises DAILY

Urinary incontinence is when your body urinates (or pees) when you laugh or sneeze. It can last for several months after childbirth. Kegel exercises strengthen the muscles that affect urination as well as the outside walls of the vagina. Strong muscles mean fewer problems like peeing unexpectedly!

How to do Kegel exercises

Tighten the muscles around your vagina and anus for several seconds (try for 10 seconds if you can) and then relax. These are the same muscles that you use to stop peeing! Practice this exercise by stopping yourself peeing—just to make sure that you’re doing it right. Once you have the feeling and know the muscles to tighten, repeat the exercise when you’re NOT peeing. Do this several times during the day, up to a total of about 25 times a day. You can do this during most activities such as when you are reading a book, watching TV or breast-feeding your baby.

Gaining Flexibility

Five to 10 minutes a day of easy stretching will reduce your chance of injury and increase your range of motion. As well, stretching will help to reduce muscle soreness after a workout, improve your posture, decrease stress, and make you feel better.

By taking time to relax and stretch, you will release tension. This is very important. You need to release tension so you can cope with your new baby and all the demands of being a mother. Here are some tips on how to stretch safely:

- Warm-up with a few minutes of light aerobic activity such as walking before you stretch.
- Include stretching in your cool down from endurance activities. During your cool down, slow your pace for a few minutes before stopping. This will relax your body and mind, helping to ensure a safer, gentler stretch.
- Stretch slowly to the point where you feel a little bit of tension. Hold that position for 10 to 20 seconds, keeping your

breath relaxed. This should NOT be painful! If it is, then you are pushing past the point of safety!

- Try static stretches that can be done with your baby beside you.
- Avoid bouncing when you stretch. It won't help you stretch farther and it might cause injury.
- Change position SLOWLY in order to avoid ligament pulls. Avoid extreme stretching and quick movements!

Additional Considerations

Physical Activity and Breastfeeding

Do physical activities AFTER breastfeeding or pumping breast milk, AND make sure to:

- Drink fluids before, during, and after your physical activities.
- Drink fluids each time you breastfeed.

The level of nutrients (energy, protein, carbohydrate, and fats) as well as the level of minerals (calcium, magnesium, sodium, and potassium) in breast milk stay the same whether you are physically active or not during the months after giving birth. So there is no reason to think your breast milk will suffer if you are physically active during the months you breastfeed your baby.

When you feel thirsty, it usually means that your body does not have enough fluids and you are dehydrated. You must do all you can to stay hydrated. To track this, look at your urine. If there is only a small amount, or if it is dark and cloudy, you are not getting enough fluids. You need to drink more! Your baby will breastfeed from 8 to 12 times a day, so you may need up to 12 cups (3 litres) of fluid each day just to replace the breast milk your baby is drinking! A good tip is to drink 250 mL (1 cup) of fluid each time you breastfeed your baby or pump your breasts.

Support your breasts and stomach

Some women wear a bathing suit or dance-style leotard on top of their bra. Others use 2 bras with an ace bandage criss-crossed over the chest and shoulders. An ace bandage is a strip or roll of woven elastic material that you can use to create even, stable pressure in a certain part of the body.

You need to support your stomach muscles too. Wear either dance tights or special underwear, such as a post-natal support girdle.

Support and Protect Your Back at all times!

The increased weight of your larger breasts may cause your shoulders to slump forward and may also increase the arch of your lower back. Here are some tips to help you protect your back:

- Strengthen your stomach muscles by doing pelvic tilts daily.

- Keep your knees bent when you are standing; they will act as "shock absorbers" that protect your back.
- When you are in the kitchen or at work, either standing or sitting, keep one foot about 4 inches off the floor. To do this, set up a kitchen step to raise your foot when you are standing, or put a pile of phone books under your desk when you are sitting. This will remove a lot of stress and strain from your lower back.

Use Proper Equipment

If you are going to do physical activities with your baby during the first 6 weeks after childbirth, make sure that you are using the correct carrier (a front pack or baby carriage). It's important to put your baby into a carrier or carriage where they are held securely with proper head and neck support.

Know When To Stop The Physical Activity

Keep your level of physical activity at a LIGHT level until vaginal bleeding has stopped.

- If any physical activity causes any pain, STOP THE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY. Be aware of any pain in your chest, back, abdomen, pelvis, or joints that does not go away. Let your caregiver or doctor know if you are having cramps that feel like menstrual cramps, shortness of breath, bleeding, or if you are feeling faint.
- If you are having heavy bleeding, STOP THE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY. Talk to your caregiver or doctor and wait until they say it is okay to resume your physical activity program.
- If you develop a breast infection or abscess, STOP THE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY. Talk to your caregiver or doctor so you can get the proper treatment. Moving your body can spread the infection, so keep your breast still until the abscess has drained or the infection has gone away.

Use Common Sense

The main goals of physical activity, exercise, and sport after giving birth are to improve your physical health and set an example so your children can choose to lead an active, vibrant, healthy lifestyle. Your personal goals and plans for physical activity, exercise and sport will depend upon your level of physical activity before you became pregnant and how physically active you were during your pregnancy.

DEC. 2011

Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS) Tel: 613-562-5667

For more information on CAAWS' *Mothers in Motion* project, please contact caaws@caaws.ca or visit the website at www.caaws.ca/mothersinmotion/e/.

Support for this project provided by:

Ontario Trillium Foundation  Fondation Trillium de l'Ontario

 Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity
Association canadienne pour l'avancement des femmes du sport et de l'activité physique

mothers in motion