



The Post-Baby Bounce Back

Once there's a baby in the house, days just seem to shorten, to-do lists seem to grow, and "me time" seems to disappear altogether. Here's how to take care of you while taking care of your little one.

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The baby's out of your belly – giggling and maybe even walking by now – so why does your body still feel foreign to you? No matter how many times you read it in books or hear it from friends, your mom and your husband, it can be hard to believe your body will ever bounce back to its pre-baby condition. Especially now that the already-limited time you once had to plan healthy meals and schedule workouts and activity now seems to have disappeared into the vast mommy vortex.

We know. We've been there. And we want to help. So we took some of your top healthy-living concerns to the experts, to get their best advice and tips on how to look and feel like yourself again.

Q: Help! Taking care of my baby feels like a 24/7 job. My mind is so cluttered with feeding and sleeping schedules, I can't even begin to think about my meal plan.

First of all, cut yourself some slack. "Your job is to take care of the baby," says **Christine Palumbo, a registered dietician from Naperville, IL.** "But you can enlist your husband, your mother, or your friends to take care of *you.*" Don't be shy: If friends offer to cook you dinner, request that the meal be a healthy one, suggests **Palumbo.** Nobody's offering to bring you a home-cooked dinner? "Try making easy meals that don't require a lot of hands-on time, such as a slow-cooker meal or a big pot of soup, that you can prepare while the baby is napping – and then freeze the rest for another day," she says. (C'mon, don't tell us you're the rare mom who actually manages to sleep when the baby does? If so, don't let us stop you!) If you're in a new moms group (they're in nearly every town;

search online or even ask at the hospital), engineer a meal swap: each mom takes a turn cooking enough food for a few other families with similar health-conscious ideals. That way you're only cooking once, but getting three or four other meals out of the exchange.

Q: I'm so exhausted that when I'm not tending to the baby I just want to sleep or veg out in front of the TV – not exercise or cook healthy meals.

You may feel like you're being lazy, but catching up on missed sleep is one of the most important aspects of your recovery, says Kim Richardson, a postpartum psychotherapist based in Michigan. "Sleep deprivation is one of the hardest aspects of new motherhood," she says. "Sneaking in a nap or having someone take over a nighttime feeding so you can get some uninterrupted sleep is one of the best gifts you can give yourself." In fact, a recent study from the health insurance organization Kaiser Permanente found that people trying to lose 10 pounds were more likely to reach that goal if they slept between six and eight hours a night. Since that's almost impossible with a new baby, catching some extra shut-eye whenever the baby is napping or on the weekends will help shed those pregnancy pounds because well-rested people are more likely to make smart food choices. Turn off the TV though – it can interrupt the body's natural sleep rhythms. Once you're feeling more rested, be sure to get some activity – it sounds counterintuitive, but it will make you feel more energized. Try taking a brisk walk outside or around your local mall. Better yet, see if a friend will keep you company – it will motivate you both.

Q: I'm so overwhelmed, and all I want to do is eat.

"Becoming a mother is a tough transition," says Richardson. "A lot of women feel overwhelmed, exhausted, and disconnected from their 'regular' life – work, friends – and they take comfort in food." Richardson suggests some alternatives: "Engage in other comforting activities, like taking a warm bath, getting some fresh air, or calling your best friend." Sure, those seem like obvious ideas, but when you're a new mom, it's easy to forget even the basic stuff! It's also important to find support: Join a new moms group, go to Weight Watchers meetings, or check out our new mom [community message board](#) to share your story and swap tips with other women who are facing the same challenges that you are. "Most importantly, don't be afraid to ask for help," says Richardson. "Figure out what it is you need most – maybe someone to hold the baby some you can get a little sleep, or someone to help with household chores – and find someone you can ask." You'll find that most people want to help; they just need to be told how.

Q: Pre-baby, I hit the gym a few times a week. Now, I'm lucky if I even shower that often.

Like sleep, sex, and fun nights out, exercise often falls to the wayside after baby arrives. And until you get the go-ahead from your doctor – usually around 6 weeks post-delivery, but longer if you've

had a C-section or any complications – you shouldn't try to exercise beyond walks with the stroller. Once you do get the green light to exercise, try fitting in fitness whenever possible. "In the beginning, all you need is 15 minutes a day, 3-4 times a week," says Helene Byrne, founder of BeFit mom, an online resource for prenatal and postpartum exercise and creator of the DVD *Bounce Back Fast! Post Natal Core Conditioning*. "If you can't get to the gym, buy a tape or enroll in a post-partum fitness class like Baby Boot Camp or Stroller Strides." Amazon.com has a wide variety of post-natal fitness DVDs, from yoga to boot camp, so you can find an exercise regimen that interests you. After about 20 weeks, Byrne says your body is most likely ready to return to your pre-pregnancy fitness routine. If you're still struggling to make time, find a gym that offers babysitting, invest in a jogging stroller, or find a fitness class like Mommy and Baby yoga where you can bring your child. If you're a working mom, try fitting in exercise on your lunch hour, either by going out for a brisk walk or by joining a gym that has locations near both your house and your office. Even small changes, such as parking further away from your office door or choosing to take the stairs instead of the elevator, can make a big difference.

Q: I am exercising, but no matter how many crunches I do, I can't lose my baby pouch.

You might have diastasis, a separation of the outermost abdominal muscles that is common in pregnancy. "No amount of losing weight will get rid of your tummy – you need to heal those muscles," says Julie Tupler, a nurse and co-author of *Lose Your Mummy Tummy*. Once your body is healed, she says, "work the innermost ab muscle – the transverse muscle – to get rid of that pouch." One exercise that Tupler recommends: Engage the transverse muscle by imagining it as an elevator, with your belly button as the engine moving it back towards the spine. "Sitting with your hips and shoulders lined up, take a deep belly breath and then bring your belly button back towards your spine," says Tupler. "Hold it for 30 seconds, counting out loud to ensure that you're not holding your breath." Tupler suggests doing 10 sets daily, anywhere – in the car, at work, or while feeding your baby.

Q: I used to love flipping through the gossip magazines, but now all I see are the celebrities like Heidi Klum and Kate Hudson who had babies and were back to their slimmed-down selves within weeks. What am I doing wrong?

Absolutely nothing, says Palumbo. "Celebrities have an entire team working for them – nannies, night nurses, personal trainers and possibly even professional chefs cooking healthy meals," she says. "A celebrity's body is her livelihood so she needs to drop pounds fast, but it's not always the healthiest or best way to do it." If you're looking to emulate a star, a better role model is Oscar-winning actress and Weight Watchers Spokesperson Jennifer Hudson. The singer lost her baby weight and then some after her son David was born in 2009 - an accomplishment that she credits to a long-term lifestyle change to healthier eating habits and more exercise.