

POST-NATAL PILATES INFORMATION SHEET

How soon can I start Pilates after the birth of my baby?

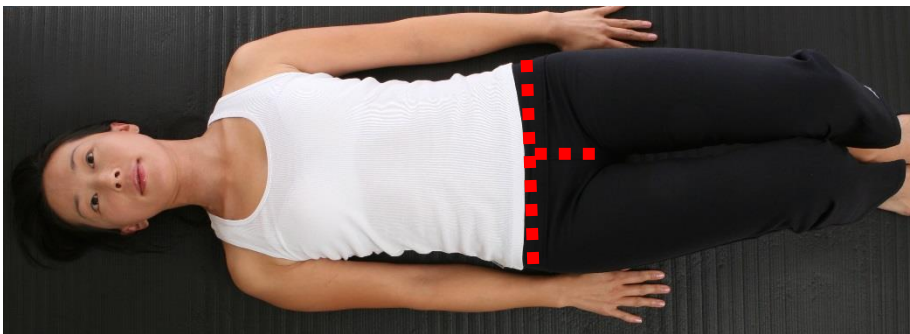
As soon as your doctor gives you clearance to return to exercise, which is usually 4 weeks for a natural delivery, and 6 weeks for a Cesarean delivery.

You can however start to do some basic activations exercises right after your birth - gently activating your pelvic floor and tightening your T-Zone actually helps decrease any swelling in your pelvic floor or abdominal region and helps with the healing process. You will find this much easier as you have practised this beforehand.

What is the T-Zone?

We call the Transversus Abdominus and Pelvic Floor muscles collectively the "T-Zone." These are your main stabilising muscles of the pelvis and spine, they draw your tummy in and help with back pain. They are also the muscles which are weakened in pregnancy.

If you draw an imaginary horizontal line between the "hip bones" this is a visualisation for the Transversus Abdominus. If you then draw a line from the centre of this line down to the pubic bone, this is a visualisation for the pelvic floor muscle. These 2 imaginary lines form a T shape on the front of the pelvis, hence the name T-zone.



The T-Zone

T-Zone activation exercise

To activate your T-Zone, start lying on your back with your knees bent and a neutral spine. Think firstly of the pelvic floor. Gently draw up the pelvic floor along the imaginary vertical line as if you were trying to stop from going to the toilet. You should feel the muscles deep in the Pelvic Floor tighten and draw upwards. You shouldn't try too hard with this, it should be a light effort, not a maximum effort.

Once the pelvic floor is tight, think of flattening the imaginary horizontal line in towards the spine, and drawing the hipbones across towards each other along the imaginary line.

If you place your fingers just inside the hipbones, you should feel the muscles tighten ever so slightly underneath the fingers. You should feel like the muscles are drawing upwards, across towards the centre and in towards the spine. Think of the T-Zone as a corset for stabilising the torso, when it tightens it pulls the area in slightly.

The rest of the abdominals should remain relaxed, and you should be able to continue to breathe. Your spine should remain neutral and still. Hold this contraction for 3 breaths, then release. Do as many times as you can throughout the day.

What can I expect to feel in my Pilates classes after giving birth?

After giving birth both your abdominal muscles and pelvic floor muscles will be very weak - you shouldn't expect to be able to instantly return to your previous level of strength for quite some time and after a lot of work - this will take at least several months.

In your Pilates sessions, you may need to initially stick to easier abdominal exercises that focus on the correct activation of your Pelvic Floor and deep abdominals (Transversus Abdominus), and slowly progress to performing harder abdominal exercises over a period of time.

Why is Pilates so important to do after I have my baby?

Pilates is probably the single most targeted and effective form of exercise to perform post pregnancy. The many benefits of a postnatal Pilates program include:

- Strengthens your Pelvic Floor and abdominals
- Helps with any back, pelvic, hip, neck and shoulder pain
- Increases your general strength you need to carry your baby around
- Improves your posture - it corrects the increased arch of your lower back and rounded shoulders
- Helps regain your pre-baby body shape, particularly the stomach
- Being a mind-body form of exercise, Pilates also helps with relaxation and gives you some time to work specifically on yourself

How long will it take for my stomach to return to normal?

A common complaint amongst new mums is that their stomach still looks big, sometimes even like they are still pregnant after giving birth. In some cases, women may be at their pre-pregnancy weight, but still have a larger stomach. There are several reasons why this can happen –

- The uterus takes 6 weeks to shrink back to its normal size
- Body fat/weight gained during the pregnancy is still sitting around the abdominal region and may take a while to lose
- The abdominal muscles have been very stretched and will take time to regain their original tone and strength to hold in the abdominal wall. In some cases with a very large baby or the mother has put on a lot of weight, the muscles will have been so stretched they may never go back to previous length, but this is rare.
- A Rectus Diastasis is present, making the abdominal wall incomplete and causing the stomach to protrude
- There is excess skin from the skin being stretched beyond its capability to return to normal

Most women want their body back as soon as possible and it can be very frustrating for them when this does not occur. It is important for you to realise that it will take time and effort and to allow at least 12 months of working on it to see results. Pilates is one of the best things that women can do to help flatten their stomach as it specifically targets the Transversus Abdominus, which pulls the abdomen in.

What is a Rectus Diastasis and will Pilates help with this?

A Rectus Diastasis is a separation of the Rectus Abdominis (or “6 pack” abdominal muscles) that run down the front of the abdomen. This occurs during the pregnancy, but is often not detected until after you give birth. Often a physiotherapist will check your abdominal muscles in hospital and let you know if you have a separation, but this is not always the case.

A Rectus Diastasis occurs in pregnancy as the abdomen gets larger. If the muscles can’t stretch enough over the growing baby then they separate in the centre and start to move apart, leaving a gap between the 2 sides of the Rectus Abdominis. This can be seen and felt at rest, but is more apparent when performing abdominal exercises such as a sit up as you can see and feel a gap between the muscles, and a doming or bulging of the abdominals. If the gap is larger than 2 fingers then the Diastasis is significant.

Pilates is one of the best things you can do to help a Diastasis as the treatment is basically avoiding any Rectus Abdominis exercise and focussing on strengthening the Transversus Abdominis and Oblique muscles which act like a corset to pull the separated muscles back together and allow healing. A specific Pilates program of exercises will do exactly that. You do however have to be very careful to avoid any sit up types of abdominal exercises and hard tabletop abdominal exercises, and stick to the more basic abdominal exercises, otherwise you will be using the Rectus Abdominis and this can actually make the problem worse.

As a general rule if you have a Diastasis, only perform abdominal exercises in which there is no separation occurring, there is no doming or bulging of your abdominals and you can keep your T-Zone correctly activated. If you stick to these rules, it will help to correct the Diastasis.

In most cases the Diastasis will heal with slow and careful progression of specific and controlled abdominal exercise. In more severe cases the exercises will help, but may not totally correct the diastasis. In extreme cases surgery may be required.

Will Pilates help strengthen my Pelvic Floor?

A lot of women face Pelvic Floor weakness and symptoms such as incontinence and poor bladder control. There are several reasons why Pelvic Floor symptoms occur:

- The weight of carrying the baby for 9 months places strain on the Pelvic Floor
- Trauma from a natural delivery can stretch and tear the muscles
- An episiotomy cuts through the muscles
- There can be nerve damage from the birth
- A prolapse may occur

Generally, Pilates is great for Pelvic Floor strengthening and will usually help with the symptoms. Your focus in your class needs to be on making sure that you have your Pelvic Floor muscles working with every exercise you do in the class, and only perform exercises that you can keep your Pelvic Floor and T-Zone on properly.

You will need to stick to lighter abdominal exercises, starting with the feet down and avoid any more challenging exercises such as some of the exercises in tabletop position. You will also need to use lighter resistance with all exercises until the muscle control improves. Performing strong abdominal contractions or using heavy resistance causes a downward pressure on the Pelvic Floor and if your Pelvic Floor isn’t strong enough, these exercises may actually make the problem worse.

Basic Pelvic Floor and T-Zone exercises should be performed at home to help as well.