



Fitnessista's
**GUIDE TO PRENATAL AND
POSTPARTUM CORE TRAINING**



Hi,

MY NAME IS GINA HARNEY and I'm a certified personal trainer, group fitness instructor, RYT 200-hr yoga instructor, and weight loss specialist. We may have met over at my blog, the Fitnessista, or at my newer postbabybod.com site.

While I've always loved health and fitness, I found myself drawn to prenatal and postpartum fitness because there is SO LITTLE information available about it. Even as a fitness instructor, I had to do a ton of additional research to figure out what was safe during pregnancy and after the baby was born. I wanted to get back into the game and reclaim my fitness levels, but also wanted to do it in the safest way possible.

I'm excited to share everything I've learned with you so that you don't have to feel stuck or lost like I did. You know what's generally safe, and can adjust it depending on your doctor's recommendations and how you're personally feeling. As always, talk with a doctor before making any fitness changes, and honor your body.

Also, let's be real here: time is a valuable commodity when you're juggling kiddos, taking care of your other obligations, and want to enjoy life. I did the research for you, and put the information into this quick, straightforward guide to prenatal and postpartum core training.

Here we go!

WHY IS CORE TRAINING IMPORTANT DURING PREGNANCY?

→ IT CAN HELP PREVENT BACK PAIN.

This is critical during pregnancy and afterwards. Late night nursing sessions, carrying the baby, and what I call the “mom reflexes” (<— quickly twisting, squatting, reaching, and doing whatever you need to do to prevent a crisis), are all supported by a strong core. If your core remains strong, it’s less likely to cause back pain as you move through the daily activities. A strong core also helps prevent sciatica, which many pregnant women suffer from.

→ IT PROMOTES HEALTHY POSTURE.

Posture changes during pregnancy, as the center of gravity shifts and you’re walking around with a bowling ball attached to your waist. By training your core, you will more likely be able to safely adjust for your various stages of posture as the baby grows.

→ IT HELPS PREVENT INCONTINENCE

In other words, no peeing when you sneeze during and after pregnancy.

→ IT HELPS US GET THROUGH LABOR AND DELIVERY!

It’s an athletic event, and the more you keep your fitness levels up, the more endurance and strength you’ll be able to maintain during such a physically grueling event

→ IT HELPS US RETURN TO PRE-PREGNANCY FITNESS LEVELS

When we keep our core active and strong during pregnancy, it’s much easier to recovery and rebuild these muscles following the birth.



SOME GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR CORE WORK DURING PREGNANCY:

NO SUPINE OR PRONE EXERCISES after the first trimester (this is in line with ACOG’s recommendations)

STAY AWAY FROM CRUNCHES, or exercises that target the rectus abdominis (your “six pack” muscle)

INSTEAD, WORK ON STRENGTHENING THE DEEP TRANSVERSE ABDOMINIS through stabilizing exercises like planks (as long as they feel good).

AVOID OVERTRAINING THE OBLIQUES. During pregnancy, your abdominal muscles separate to make room for the baby. After the baby is born, they will work to go back to place. If you’re overtraining your obliques, you can essentially train your muscles to pull apart farther. We don’t want these muscles to get insanely strong during pregnancy; wait until after baby is here!

PRENATAL CORE TRAINING

WHEN YOU'VE GOT A BUN IN THE OVEN, there's a variety of physiological factors and events that occur continuously throughout the day to prepare the body to nourish the baby, deliver, and breastfeed. As far as muscular changes go, the core goes through a serious transformation as the uterus houses the growing baby. To make room, the abdominals separate. The goal is to let this happen as naturally as possible without rocking the boat, so things are able to safely restore and return back to center following childbirth.

What's generally safe

FIRST TRIMESTER: With doc's approval, you can generally continue to resume your routine during the first trimester if you feel well enough and it feels good while you're doing it. As far as core training goes, I would avoid any extremely intense movements or crunching movements, but rather focus on stabilization. Work on training your deep transverse abdominis, instead of your external rectus abdominis.

You can continue to perform supine exercises (on your back) as long as it feels good and you don't have any complications. In other words, with doc's ok, do your thing!

I think it's worth mentioning that core work isn't a great emphasis during pregnancy. Focus on moves that promote healthy posture and strengthening the pelvic floor. During my own pregnancies, I liked to keep cardio, strength, stretching and rest the pillars of my program. Core work was occasional, and had a renewed and functional purpose.

SECOND AND THIRD TRIMESTERS: This is when things start to noticeably change, and you'll want to avoid pressure on the inferior vena cava, which is a large vein that returns deoxygenated blood back to the heart. When you're on your back, this can put pressure on this vein and prevent oxygen flow to the baby after prolonged time.

Here's the kicker though: sometimes you can feel this happening, and sometimes you can't. When I was pregnant, if I was ever on my back, I started to feel a little lightheaded and immediately knew to roll onto my side. I did a ton of research on this, because some of my fellow fitness instructor friends continued to work out on their back during pregnancy and were completely fine, and found a study indicating that the oxygen to the baby was compromised and the mamas had no signals. My thoughts: why risk it? There are so many modifications in the sea, and that weight bench will be there waiting after the baby is born.

CORE EXERCISES

MODIFIED PLANK (watch your belly when you do this and beware of the cone! If your belly starts to make a cone shape during any exercises, it indicates higher abdominal pressure and can increase the likelihood of diastasis recti <—when the abdominals remain separated after birth.

DEADLIFTS (you may need a wider stance)

PLANKS modify as needed on your knees

CAT/COW. Do these gently, making sure to inhale as you drop your belly and gaze up, and exhale to round your back.

SQUATS! These can be even more beneficial than kegels and can help to prepare for birth positions. As you squat, be sure to keep good posture and your weight in your heels. Exhale to rise.

TRANSVERSE ABDOMINIS HOLD. For this one, sit on a chair with good posture and feet flat on the floor. Take an inhale to relax, and as you exhale, gently pull your belly up and in. (Think about it as giving the baby a little hug.) Inhale to release.

BRIDGE (skip this exercise if you feel uncomfortable getting onto the floor and back up again)



SPINAL BALANCE. If you find that it's too tricky to have one hand and one leg off the floor at the same time, do just one at a time.

SOME THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND: Posture changes. As your belly becomes bigger, there can be more of a curve in the low back, rounded shoulders, and a tuck of the chin as the head pushes forward. Focus on exercises that promote healthy posture (strengthening the back and glute muscles, stretching the chest, and focus on minimizing an extreme arch in the low back. The goal is a gentle arch.) Keep your chin lifted, and your ears in line with your neck.

* Pregnancy is not the time to do anything new in your routine. Focus on maintaining instead of adding.

*You can do during this time if you were doing them beforehand**

The goal is to maintain activity levels and do the things that make you feel good. As far as prenatal fitness goes, you may find that certain activities don't feel as good as they used to. It's a great opportunity to pay attention to your body, and focus on the activities you enjoy. During my first pregnancy, walking and all cardio classes (with impact modifications) felt amazing. I wasn't as into strength training. During my second pregnancy, I had horrible round ligament and hip pain. (Turns out I was carrying an almost 11-lb turkey!) I focused on yoga and strength training with far less cardio.

Prenatal fitness is an entire ebook in itself, but in general: Do what feels good, what your body is used to, and what the doc says is ok.

Avoid overheating, drink lots of water, and make sure that you can comfortably say your address in one breath while you're working out. Focus on maintaining instead of adding. Also, avoid any exercises where you could fall or risk trauma to your belly and the baby.

CORE WORK YOU SHOULD AVOID

CRUCHES. Skip any type of crunching motion, especially as your belly continues to grow.

BICYCLES

EXERCISES WITH BOTH LEGS OFF THE FLOOR (leg raises, scissors, Pilates hundreds, etc)

CHALLENGING OBLIQUE WORK

SUPINE EXERCISES

TRYING TO GET A SIX PACK. We're going for the opposite right now ;)

POSTPARTUM CORE TRAINING

Now, let's talk about core training after the baby makes his or her arrival!

UP TO [98% OF WOMEN](#) EXPERIENCE DIASTASIS RECTI, when the abdominal muscles separate to make room for baby. There is a membrane between the two muscle walls, which can be stretched or split which causes a separation of the rectus abdominis, and can create a "belly pooch" that can be a PITA to get rid of later. [This is an awesome website](#) with information on how to check for diastasis. After the baby is born, the body works to bring everything back to center, including the abs. If you know that you have abdominal separation, avoid crunches, full planks, bicycles, double leg raises, the the Pilates Hundred. I also would avoid anything specifically targeting the obliques. As I mentioned before, you don't want to overly strengthen these muscles to pull everything OUTWARD. We want to let things safely restore and recover back to center.

In most cases, you can begin training your pelvic floor immediately after, or very soon following the birth. (Talk with your doctor to make sure, depending on your birth experience.) The pelvic floor is a major (and often overlooked) part of our core, and one that will help to strengthen the body from the inside out. As you contract your pelvic floor muscles, make sure you are exhaling and drawing the belly up and in. It also helps to meet with a pelvic floor physical therapist to make sure you're doing this correctly, because doing it incorrectly can do more harm than good. Think about drawing the belly button in towards the spine

and imagine a zipper in between your ribs, zipping everything together. By kegal-ing and diaphragmatic breathing, you can also work to reduce your abdominal separation.

Another important aspect of pelvic core training to make sure that you can RELAX the pelvic floor instead of constantly tightening. If we fail to relax these muscles, it hinders full range of motion, and actually makes these muscles weaker. Focus on relaxing as much as strengthening. Don't go kegal crazy, mmm k? I highly, highly recommend the DVD "Hab It!" (you can also buy her programs online) for safe pelvic floor training after birth.

Wait until you're cleared (usually around 6 weeks) to ease into core training. I would start with very simple moves and see how you feel. Avoid training the rectus abdominis (the outer core and "six pack") muscles, because they can push everything OUT. This is the opposite of what we want to do. If you find yourself doing any exercise and your belly is pushing OUT, ease back. You want your transverse abdominis (the deep muscles that pull our belly in like a corset) to be engaged for all of our core work. A good way to start this is to lie on the floor with knees bent. Take a big inhale and fill your belly. (Watch your chest to make sure it doesn't puff outward. Focus on moving your belly only.) As you exhale, contract your pelvic floor and pull your belly button up and in. Do this for a few minutes each day until you feel comfortable engaging the transverse abdominis.

When you're ready to move onto more traditional core exercises, keep this contraction, and this "pulling in" feeling as you complete your core work.

Avoid extreme oblique training, especially if you still have diastasis recti, where the abdominals separate to make room for the baby. If you overtrain your obliques, they will continue to pull your abs apart. Not what we're going for here. To check for diastasis, there are a variety of videos on YouTube with tutorials (make sure it's from a physical therapist's account, not "Hi, I'm a person with zero qualifications filming in my garage" just to make sure the source is valid) or ask your doctor or pelvic floor PT to check for you. Make sure you have a two-finger gap or less before proceeding with more traditional core work. (If it's wider than 2 inches, talk to your doc who can hook you up with Physical Therapy to help reduce the separation.)

What's generally safe:

- Balance and stabilization exercises
- Kegels and diaphragmatic breathing
- Spinal balance
- Cat/cow
- Reverse crunches/pelvic tilts

What you should avoid initially *

- Crunches
- Scissors
- Pilates hundreds
- Leg lowers and lifts; any exercise with both legs off the floor

* At least until you regain strength and can keep your belly pulled in the entire time.

MY FAVORITE POSTPARTUM CORE EXERCISES

DIAPHRAGMATIC BREATHING (with or without kegels); the same breathing strategy mentioned above

MARCHES: lie on your back with your knees bent and feet flat on the floor. Keep your knees bent at 90 degrees and march one leg up. (Stop with your knee in line with your hip.) Lower back down and complete on the opposite side.

HEEL SLIDES: start on your back, knees bent and feet flat on the floor. As you inhale, slide one foot out (toes pointing up) and exhale to slide back to starting position. Repeat on the opposite side.

MODIFIED PLANK (or plank against a wall or countertop to modify). Make sure you are breathing the entire time, and keep your hips in line with the rest of your body.

PELVIC TILTS: for this one, lie on your back with both feet flat on the floor. As you inhale, gently arch your back and fill your belly. As you exhale, pull your belly in towards your spine and neutralize the arch in your back, pressing your hip bones slightly up. A good progression from this after you get the hang of it is reverse crunches.

HIP RAISES: Start in a bridge position, and gently lower your hips towards the floor. Exhale and squeeze your glutes to lift.

I hope that you enjoyed this core training guide! If you're looking to safely build back your fitness levels after birth and accomplish new health and fitness goals, check out my post baby bod programs. I know how it feels to be short on time, juggling the many tasks moms have to do, and trying to figure out health and fitness in the mix. My post baby bod plans break everything down into simple modules, so it's easier to be consistent and stay motivated with your routine. [Check out the details here.](#)

xoxo, Gina

