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May 2010

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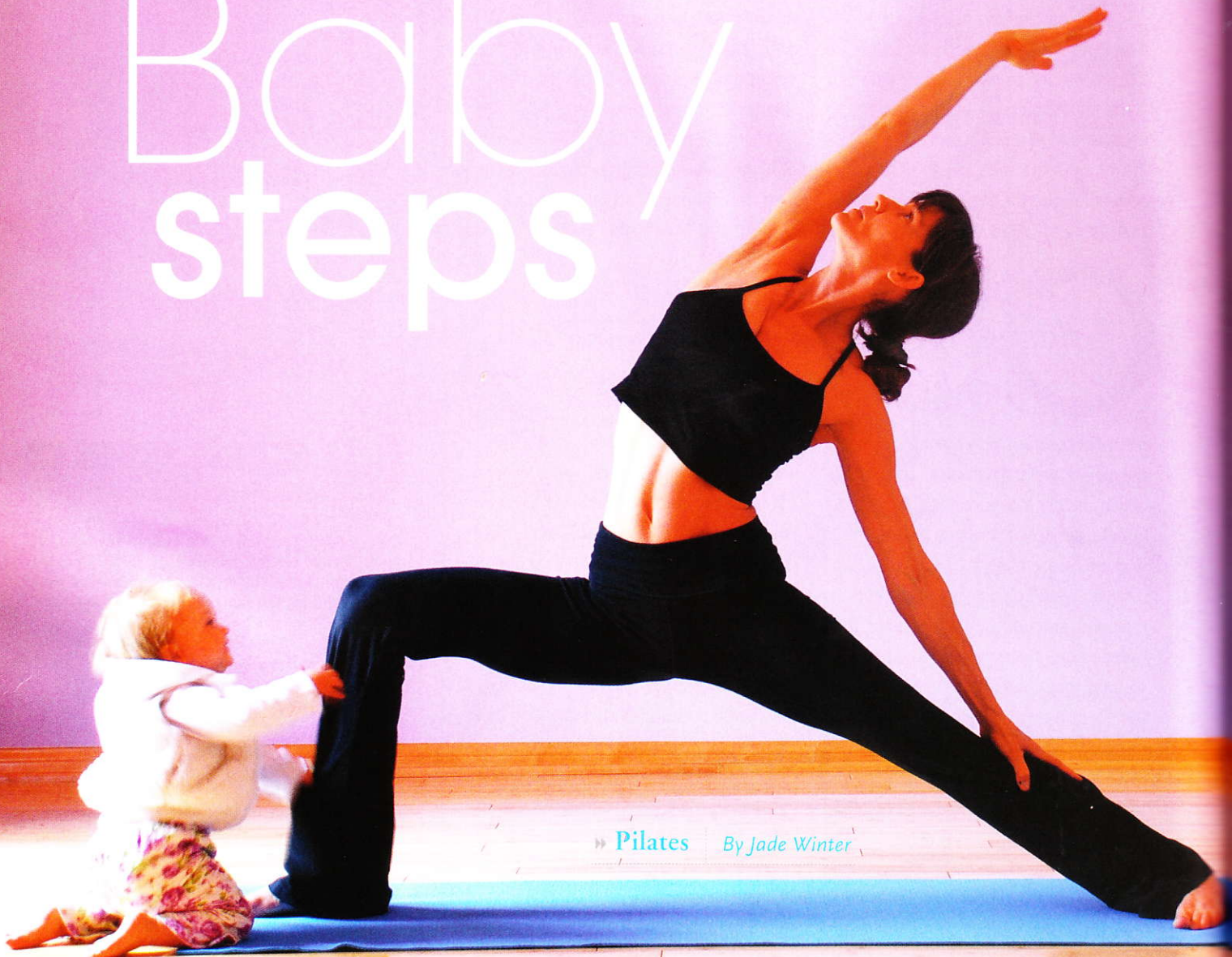
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Baby steps



» Pilates | By Jade Winter

{ Wow! Life sure has changed. With a new addition to the family comes a whole new routine: the endless changing of nappies, the late-night feeds, the lack of sleep... the list goes on. However, you've decided it's time to get back into shape and you want to get that pre-baby body back. Here are some ideas to start you on your way to successful body toning.

Honour your health and your body

Taking the time out for you, to improve your health and strengthen your body again, will make you a fitter, happier person and therefore better equipped to meet the demands of motherhood. So

prioritise YOU and make the necessary arrangements in your week to include some body strengthening.

Before you get down on the floor and do 100 crunches, or run 20km, it's important to recognise that your body has gone through months of change and may have sustained some damage.

You've had
your beautiful
baby and now
it's time to
get back into
an exercise
regime. Jade
Winter's advice
will have
you not only
looking great,
but feeling
great too

It is different now, so you must train it differently. On the flip-side, don't leave it too long. Your body won't necessarily strengthen itself again without a little help from you. If you are breastfeeding, this will also affect your hormone levels and clocking up the kilometres may have some affect on lactation levels.

Patience and persistence

The important thing here is to be patient. Don't jump the gun and run a marathon on the weekend – your body needs to be rebuilt from the inside out. Yes, you want to get back into shape ASAP, but you've got your whole life ahead of you to lose weight and tone up again. You may be feeling so many emotions – just don't let frustration at the shape in which your body is now be one of them.

Take care

There are important things to consider when you're getting back into exercise post partum. One is your hormone levels. These will be in a state of flux for quite some time after giving birth. And the same hormones that enabled your body to deliver your baby may still be around up to a year later.

The big one here is called relaxin and its job is to relax your ligaments to allow your pelvis to become more pliable – or even separate – during labour, to allow the baby's head to fit through. This has a knock-on affect, with other joints in your body being slightly more pliable and a little more prone to injury for a while, so high-impact exercise such as touch football and netball are not generally recommended.

The first step

The first thing many mums want to do is to tone their tummy again, but busting out 100 crunches is not the way to go. Instead, you need to strengthen the transversus abdominus and pelvic floor first, as these are the muscles that flatten the stomach and are also the ones that suffer the greatest impact during pregnancy.

Note: Please do not do anything besides basic pelvic floor exercises until your six-week check-up with your obstetrician.

The pelvic floor

The weight of carrying your baby for nine months, along with the trauma of birth, can lead to weakened pelvic floor muscles and possibly even a prolapse. Your pelvic floor will need retraining and strengthening on an ongoing basis.

A prolapse occurs when the muscles and ligaments suspending the pelvic floor and pelvic organs become so stretched and weak that they sag downwards. In severe cases, the bladder, uterus and bowel can all be affected. Symptoms include lack of bladder control, stress, incontinence, a feeling of sagging in the pelvic floor and weakness through the area. The treatment for both pelvic floor weakness and prolapse is to perform pelvic floor exercises, but if the ligament damage is too great, surgery may also be required.

Implications for exercise

You can train the pelvic floor to activate again by starting off with very basic exercises, progressing as the pelvic floor strengthens. However, take care with abdominal exercises and with lifting heavy weights if the pelvic floor is weak. A strong abdominal contraction bears down on the pelvic floor, and if it is not strong enough to counter this pressure, it will be forced downwards, contributing to the problem. Your focus must be more on the activation and isolation of this muscle, rather than on global abdominal strengthening.

Rectus abdominus and a rectus diastasis

Each side of the rectus abdominus muscle – that’s your six-pack – meets in the midline of the abdomen to form a fibrous structure called the linea alba, and during pregnancy, all this needs to stretch to accommodate the growing baby. Unfortunately, though, this is the weakest point of the abdominal corset. In some cases, when the linea alba is placed under too much pressure, rather than the rectus abdominus muscles stretching, the linea alba overstretches and can tear. This is known as a diastasis or separation of the rectus abdominus. The rectus diastasis will look like a vertical bulge or separation down the middle of your tummy and will be more noticeable when you do certain movements such as a sit-up.

Implications for exercise

Performing sit-up movements, where the rectus abdominus is working without using the transversus abdominus and pelvic floor properly, can make the separation worse. Post pregnancy, start with very basic pelvic floor and transversus abdominus activation. Progress to exercises using the rectus abdominus only as the strength of these muscles allows. When performing any abdominal exercises, feel with your fingers to check that any rectus diastasis isn’t bulging or opening further.

Transversus abdominus and pelvic floor

To activate your transversus abdominus and pelvic floor, simply lie on your back with your feet on the floor and your knees bent. Find the front of your hip bones – the part that’s pointing up towards the

ceiling – and place your fingers on them. Next, roll your fingertips onto the inside of your hips, so they are about 1cm inside the bone.

Now engage your pelvic floor as if you were stopping a flow of urine, drawing up internally through your vagina, while constricting the muscles deep in your back passage as if you were trying not to break wind, and hold tight. You should feel your pelvic floor tighten. Once you’ve mastered this exercise, recruit your transversus abdominus as well.

To do this, while engaging your pelvic floor, imagine there is a line on the surface of your stomach connecting your hip bones together. Focus on drawing that imaginary line towards your spine, at the same time using it to pull your hip bones towards each other. Make sure you don’t suck in your stomach or raise your ribcage. You may also like to think of drawing your tummy button towards your spine. You should feel a small amount of tension in the muscles just inside your hip bones, under your fingertips. This is your pelvic floor and transversus abdominus working together and activating. Keep the pressure on your fingers and quickly release your stomach muscles. You should feel the tension give way.

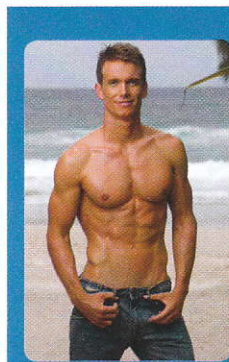
Repeat the activation of these two muscles until you master it. Try to keep all the other stomach muscles relaxed at this stage, as we are just focused

on isolation and activation. Once you have mastered this, strengthened these muscles and built up your endurance, you can progress to trying to hold the activation while doing increasingly challenging exercises.

As you move on to exercises such as crunches, it’s important to note that when you begin to curl your upper body up off the floor and start to use some of the other stomach muscles, such as the rectus abdominus and obliques, your stomach will want to bulge outwards. You should always be focussed on flattening that imaginary line on the surface of your tummy towards your spine to prevent this. Only ever curl up as high as you can maintain a totally flat stomach and feel to make sure that any rectus diastasis doesn’t pop out or separate further.

Professional fine-tuning

It’s a great idea to find a physio or an experienced Pilates instructor to help guide you through this critical post-partum rehabilitation phase. Posture correction and appropriate pacing, provided by a qualified instructor, will ensure you strengthen your body without causing injury. Also, having workout sessions pre-booked will assist you with the discipline it takes to prioritise your health needs amidst the conflicting pressures of life with a young family. «



Jade Winter is co-founder of the Studio Pilates International brand. He is also a former member of the Australian Olympic swimming team. Jade used Pilates as a cross-training tool to enhance his swimming performance, ultimately achieving a world No 1 ranking in his event. He now focuses on fulfilling his business vision of empowering and inspiring one million people to do Studio Pilates International workouts on a daily basis.