

Losing weight after pregnancy

Getting back into "regular" clothes is exciting yet challenging for most new mothers. But don't expect to be able to get into your favourite pair of jeans for at least several weeks. Keep in mind it took some 40 weeks to gain your pregnancy weight, so it will take time to lose it, too.

As for guidelines, start out slowly, since you need to conserve your energy to [recover from labour and the birth](#). Many doctors and midwives advise waiting until after your postnatal check-up (usually six weeks after delivery) to start a proper [exercise routine](#). But most new mums can begin walking and doing [pelvic floor exercises](#) and lower tummy muscle exercises almost straightaway.

During the [first six weeks](#), you can begin brisk [walking](#) to increase your circulation and get some general exercise. Do what you can handle, even if it's only 10 to 15 minutes, and increase your time as you become stronger. As you walk, don't over stride, and let your arms swing naturally by your sides. Warm up with five to 10 minutes of rhythmic activity such as marching, gentle knee bends, shoulder rolls, and arm circles. Try to exercise three times a week for 20 to 30 minutes. Remember to do your pelvic floor exercises as you walk to help avoid developing postnatal [urinary incontinence](#).

After you've had your postnatal check up, build up to 50 to 60 minutes of continuous walking, four to five days a week. Of course, you can [take your baby with you](#) in a buggy. Once you can walk comfortably for 20 minutes, begin to increase your speed. Aim to walk one mile in 15 minutes.

With a new baby around, [finding the time](#) to fit exercise into your daily life is difficult but not impossible, as long as you make it a priority. Try to do three 10-minute sessions throughout the day if you can't fit in a full 30 minutes with a newborn. And be sure to find an activity that you enjoy and look forward to so exercise isn't a chore.

Exercises that can be done with your baby are often easier to fit into your routine. Some mothers put their baby in a [sling](#) and do some simple dance movements to music. In my case, I sometimes placed my daughter in a front pack and did lunges, squats, and arm weights. You may want to join a postnatal exercise class -- these usually have a crèche attached and are a good way of meeting other new mothers as well.

Another possibility is an exercise video. Put your baby in an infant seat, [high chair](#), or playpen while you exercise, or time your sessions for her nap time.

Be patient, and keep these tips in mind as you work toward your goal:

- Weigh yourself only once per week to keep the stress of slow weight loss to a minimum. Losing about half a kilo / a pound per week is safe.
- Once you get the green light from your doctor, any type of aerobic exercise will help

you shed the extra pounds. Exercises that use large muscle groups (walking, swimming, biking, or jogging) and elevate your heart rate are particularly effective.

- If you're new to the joy of exercise, start slowly and increase your intensity and duration over time. If you exercise too hard too soon after delivery, your vaginal flow (lochi) may increase or turn pink -- a signal to slow down.
- If you're [breastfeeding](#), exercise when your breasts aren't full of milk. For comfort and extra support, wear a sports bra over your [nursing bra](#).
- Applaud yourself for small goals and achievements, such as exercising three times per week.
- This isn't the time to diet to lose weight. Though milk production is largely independent of nutritional intake during the first few months of breastfeeding (the fat accumulated in pregnancy provides a ready supply of calories,) if your diet isn't adequate, you're more likely to be tired and listless. (Read our [diet for a healthy breastfeeding mum](#) article for more ideas.)

Good luck -- it'll take some time to get your pre-pregnancy body back, but with persistence you may end up in [better shape](#) than before pregnancy.

Some of the calories required for breast milk production are supplied by body fat reserves laid down during pregnancy. However, additional calories are needed over and above your pre-pregnancy intake to provide enough energy to supply the needs of your growing baby. As you start to wean your baby, your calorie needs will gradually return to pre-pregnancy levels.

Department of Health guidelines suggest the following amounts of extra calories during the first three months of breastfeeding:

Up to one month -- 450 calories
Up to two months -- 530 calories
Up to three months -- 570 calories

However, recent research suggests that these figures are too high and that an extra 300-400 calories per day is enough for fully breastfeeding mothers during the first three months.

There are two sets of figures for the additional calorie intake required after three months.

Group 1 mothers are those whose breast milk no longer supplies all or most of their baby's food after the first three months.

Group 2 mothers are those who supply all or nearly their entire baby's energy and nutrient needs for six months or more.

3-6 months:

Group 1 -- 480 calories

Group 2 -- 570 calories

More than 6 months:

Group 1 -- 240 calories

Group 2 -- 550 calories

What should I be eating?

Think of breastfeeding as continued motivation to follow the healthy diet you followed during pregnancy. Focus on eating whole grains and cereals, fresh fruits and vegetables, and foods that provide plenty of protein, calcium, and iron (and, as always, an occasional treat is fine).

Opt for nutritious snacks like yoghurt, sandwiches made with wholemeal bread filled with leafy greens and canned salmon, tuna, cheese or hummous, a jacket potato with baked beans, or fruit.

Drink plenty of water to help maintain your milk supply

Be sure to drink plenty of fluids -- as much as eight to 12 glasses of water a day is about right. This will help your body to produce the milk you need for your baby.

Watch what you eat and drink

Substances like caffeine, alcohol, and other toxins can pass from your blood into your breast milk, so excessive amounts should be avoided. Nicotine from cigarettes and drugs also pass into your breast milk and should be avoided (your doctor can advise you on the suitability of prescribed medications). You'll be able to work out if your child is sensitive to something you eat or drink, because she'll show her discomfort by being unsettled after feeds, crying inconsolably, or sleeping badly.

"If I drank caffeinated coffee I found I couldn't calm my daughter down," says new mum Kim McCarthy. "When I went back to decaf, she was fine." If a baby is allergic to something you've eaten, you may see a reaction on her skin (rash or hives), in her breathing (wheezing or congestion), or in her stools (green or mucousy). Ask your health visitor for more advice.

While some women swear that hot or spicy dishes upset their babies, trial and error may be your best guide, as food-induced irritability differs markedly from one baby to the next. If you find you can eat garlic chicken or a fiery vegetable curry without making your baby unhappy, then dig in. One note of caution, though -- some common colic offenders include broccoli, cabbage, onions and Brussels sprouts.

Get plenty of iron

If you took a vitamin supplement when you were pregnant, you might not need one now that you've had your baby. You may very well need an iron supplement, however. Many women have depleted iron stores during a good chunk of their childbearing years. Check with your doctor, midwife, or health visitor to see what she recommends. And if you do continue with a general vitamin supplement, remember that it can't make up for poor eating habits. Strive to eat a well-balanced, varied diet.

What about dieting during breastfeeding?

Lose weight gradually by combining a healthy, low-fat diet with moderate exercise. Rapid weight loss may pose a danger to your baby because it possibly releases toxins -- normally stored in your body fat -- into the bloodstream, increasing the amount of these contaminants that wind up in your milk.

Plus, breastfeeding helps to burn up the fat deposited during pregnancy and uses it for producing milk. A mum who breastfeeds burns a lot more calories than one who doesn't, which means most breastfeeding mothers can lose around 0.5 kg / 1 pound a month, simply because of the energy demands of producing milk.

Do still count on taking 10 months to a year to return to your pre-pregnancy weight, though. If you do decide to cut down slightly on your food intake, wait until at least six weeks after your baby is born. Limiting what you eat in the early weeks of lactation may reduce your milk supply.

The Food Standards Agency has the latest information on food safety, including nutrition during pregnancy, breastfeeding and policy on baby foods, including infant and follow-on formula and weaning.

Although unfortunately I've found that there really is very little you can do to [prevent or get rid of stretch marks](#), using a good body moisturiser every day has become essential this pregnancy, as my skin has become drier than usual. One of the best all-rounders that I've come across is Avent's Indulgent Body Cream. I've been using it on my arms and legs and on my bump, even though it's already covered with stretch marks from first time round! It smells gorgeous, it contains shea butter and almond oil to make it extra moisturising, and it's priced at a very reasonable £6 for a 200ml tube. I use it after a shower in the morning and before going to bed, and it seems to be helping my itchy skin, which for some reason is worse at night.

Clarins makes several products specifically designed for pregnancy. Their Tonic Body Treatment Oil has been around for quite a while. The oil is super-light and disappears on contact with the skin. It contains natural plant extracts and essential oils of peppermint, sage, geranium and rosemary. It is said to improve skin elasticity and prevent stretch marks - I'm a bit sceptical about that claim but it's lovely to use nonetheless. It costs £28 for 100ml - pricey, but pregnancy is a time for indulgence, isn't it?

Feet and toes

For a real treat, and if you're shopping in London, head off to Push Maternity in Islington, where they stock the US's exclusive thatglow range. Its Fanciful Feet foot and leg treatment cream is not at all cheap at £20, but its blend of peppermint, menthol and lavender oil certainly makes my tired thirty-something legs and feet feel

refreshed! For a cheaper alternative that's easier to get hold of, Miriam Stoppard's refreshing foot gel with menthol costs £5 and is available from chemists and supermarkets nationwide.

Another favourite is Clarins Energizing Emulsion for tired legs. It sounds strange, but believe it or not, it really does seem to relieve the sensation of "heavy legs" that you sometimes get with pregnancy. It's an ultra light lotion, which you can apply to your feet and legs at any time of the day. You can even apply it over tights or stockings! The herbal fragrance of sage, peppermint and cypress is very invigorating and we gave it top marks in the office when our energy levels were dipping mid-afternoon. Price is £18 for a 125 ml bottle.

Oils and potions

If you're worried about using essential oils on the skin directly during pregnancy, I've found a few products that are safe to use but also smell delicious. Not really a skincare product, I'd recommend Avent again for its Future Mother Sleep Easy Essence. I've found that my so-called "morning" sickness is worse this pregnancy and is particularly annoying at night when I'm trying to get to sleep. This essence contains a blend of essential oils, including ylang ylang, patchouli, camomile, lavender and peppermint which are combined in concentrations which are safe for pregnancy. By putting a few drops on my pillow at night it really does seem to help ease the nausea. It costs a reasonable £5.99.

For a real indulgent treat, I'd nominate E'Spa's nourishing body oil. It doesn't contain any essential oils, just a blend of sweet almond oil and jojoba oil with an infusion of calendula oil. The oil sinks in straight away and it makes a refreshing change after some of the over-fragranced products out there on the market, ideal for anyone suffering from morning sickness or an over-sensitive sense of smell! It costs £24 for 100ml.

Gorgeous gifts

If you're looking for a gift for a pregnant friend, I'd recommend Zita West's pregnancy range, and in particular, her Pregnancy Essentials Collection. It comes in a beautifully packaged box and contains three products. The Back Ease Massage Oil, which is scented with refreshing grapefruit and lemon oils, can be used throughout pregnancy and also during labour. Beautiful belly balm is designed from the fourth month of pregnancy onwards, and is a very soft, chamomile-scented cream to massage into your bump. I haven't tried the final product yet, the delightfully-named pre-conditioning down under. It's designed to be massaged into your perineum to help avoid tearing during labour, and is used for the last 6-8 weeks of pregnancy. But there is evidence to show that [perineal massage](#) can work to help avoid tearing during labour, so I may well give it a go! The gift box costs £39.50.

The prize for the most luxurious pregnancy pampering gift must however go to Elemis for its divinely packaged Nurturing Mother and Baby collection, wrapped in an exquisite purple silk box. The collection's star product is a huge bottle of Skin Nourishing Milk Bath, which contains milk protein, camellia oil, oat extract and lavender and chamomile oils. It is incredibly moisturising -- the product is even recommended for eczema and psoriasis sufferers. Next up is Japanese Camellia Oil Blend, for pregnancy massage, a favourite of supermodels everywhere. Finally, a small tube of Instant Refreshing Gel completes the set, for swollen legs and aching lower backs. The boxed set comes complete with a flannel and cuddly bear. Priced at £42.50 for the set, it's my most expensive recommendation, but given that the products bought individually would cost you over £60, I think it's very good value for money indeed. If you know of a (would-be) yummy mummy, this is the present for her

For most women, the hormonal changes that take place during pregnancy actually make your hair appear healthier. It is more common for hair to fall out after the birth of the baby rather than when you are pregnant. Hair loss during pregnancy is quite unusual.

There is little information available about hair loss during pregnancy, but one possibility is that dry hair may become drier as a result of high levels of progesterone, the female hormone produced in the ovaries. Progesterone works with oestrogen to regulate the reproductive cycle. If this is the case, your hair will be more prone to crack and break, especially in later pregnancy. As it breaks off near the roots it may appear to be hair loss, although it actually isn't. Either way, this can be very distressing.

Speak with your midwife or doctor to make sure there is no other reason for your problem, especially if you have any long-term medical or dietary condition.

Meanwhile:

- do not over brush your hair
- treat it gently
- use a mild shampoo
- contact a well-qualified hairdresser for more advice
- be careful about the use of chemicals, such as colours or perms, as hair can react differently to treatments when you are pregnant

You can be fairly certain that your hair will return to normal after the birth of your baby and there's no reason to think that it will happen again in a future pregnancy.