

The Post-Natal “CORE 4”

By Celeste Goodson



Most women know that they'll need to rest and recover post-partum, but many don't realize how deconditioned the core has become (even in active pregnant women). After all, going through pregnancy, labor and delivery is more physically challenging on the body than running a marathon, according to a recent study by the University of Michigan. While physiologically they are quite different, childbirth is more likely to have serious injuries beyond excessive muscle soreness. I can vouch for this as I've personally gone through natural childbirth twice and have also run four marathons.

Going through pregnancy is a very unique, amazing physiological experience, and while rest is important, so is core reconditioning. Why? Picture a balloon deflated after it has been blown up. It is wrinkled and stretched out, right? This is pretty similar to how the postpartum belly looks. The uterus is still enlarged and the muscles, nerves, fascia and skin are all stretched out. While the uterus shrinks down over several weeks post-partum, muscles and connective tissue (fascia) do not shorten and strengthen on their own. However, with proper exercise and splinting, the muscles can tighten, shorten and strengthen. While fascia typically responds slower than muscle, we do have the ability to re-strengthen both.

The “CORE 4” chart* shows the typical core weakness issues women deal with after an uncomplicated delivery.

1) The Uncoordinated Inner Core

Because the muscles and tissue stretch so much over 9 months, nerves are affected. This causes a misfiring of proper breathing patterns and muscle coordination. This can be corrected easily with specific core exercises and breathing techniques. If you have been doing this pre-pregnancy, it will become second nature much faster after childbirth.

2) Deflated/Stretched Out Muscles

Remember the balloon? Your muscles have stretched out and lengthened considerably. Even women who have kept up core strength during pregnancy do not have full core strength after pregnancy. Until you have re-strengthened your core, suddenly lifting heavy items will put you at risk for back injuries. The good news is your weak muscles have a great response rate to exercise.

UNCOORDINATED INNER CORE	DEFLATED MUSCLES
Diaphragm TVA Muscles Pelvic Floor Multifidus	Elongated & Weak Inner & Outer Core Muscles
WEAKENED TISSUE	CORE INSTABILITY
Ab Separation 1+Fingerwidths OR Diastasis Recti 3+fingerwidths	Inner Core Outer Core Hips Postural Muscles

Post-Natal Core Quadrant
Common Weakness

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*CORE 4 Chart

3) Weakened Fascia/Connective Tissue

When muscles stretch out, so does the fascia. Most postpartum women have some degree of ab separation (1+ finger width apart). While this is minimal stretching, the tissue is still somewhat weakened and vulnerable to stretching further until tissue regains strength and the core is strong and firing correctly. Splinting along with correct exercise post-partum can help speed this healing process. Many moms will deal with a larger separation called diastasis recti (3+ finger widths or more apart).

4) Core Instability

Because of the weak muscles, fascia and nerve coordination, the core is somewhat unstable. Running, jumping or exercising intensely on an unstable core will increase chances of hip, back, knee and pelvic problems.

While it is natural for the female body to undergo musculoskeletal changes during pregnancy, it will not necessarily strengthen with time. It takes specific work. Women can benefit greatly by spending a few weeks re-strengthening and re-stabilizing the inner core muscles first. Our habits, alignment, movement and hormones all play a factor in how long reconditioning can take. By focusing on the core foundation first before resuming typical exercise (running, boot camps, cross fit., yes, even some Pilates and yoga need to be modified) until the core is strong and stable, women will have less injuries and pelvic/core/back issues down the road. The main goal throughout post-partum should not be to lose weight, but to recondition their core and make sure they are not dealing with any post-partum injuries.

*Celeste Goodson, owner of **MomBod Fitness**, has worked in health and fitness settings for over 15 years as well as physical therapy and cardiac rehab. She has worked exclusively with pre and post natal moms for the last 5 years. She developed **ReCORE** and the **FITsplint** after realizing women can benefit from proper screening, testing, rebuilding and guidelines before returning to typical exercise. Celeste has a B.S. in Fitness and Wellness, is an **ACE Cert. Medical Exercise Specialist**, certified to train Pre & Post Natal women as well as those with musculoskeletal, neuromuscular and metabolic conditions cleared by physicians.*