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strong to the core

Get a fit pre-pregnancy body that will benefit you throughout your nine months, childbirth, and beyond.

By Tracey Mallett Photographs By Dorit Thies

Working out is one of the best things a woman can do for a healthy pregnancy—it not only benefits the baby, but it also gives you strong core muscles that help prevent back and hip pain.

Starting to exercise before you conceive is ideal, since you'll be able to continue throughout pregnancy (with your doctor's okay, of course). But if you don't have a regular exercise routine in place before getting pregnant, then you shouldn't jump into one during your first

trimester. Most healthcare practitioners generally advise women not to start a new exercise regime within the first 12 weeks of getting pregnant.

Strengthening the core muscles is a great way to get your body ready to carry a child. During pregnancy, women's bodies release a hormone called relaxin, which relaxes the ligaments—especially those in the pelvic region—in preparation for the growth of the baby and for childbirth. That's one reason it's impor-

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tant to strengthen larger muscles (glutes, inner thighs, abdominals, pelvic floor, lats, and obliques) before conceiving—to keep the core region strong and stable during pregnancy.

Try these seven moves to help create a stable pelvis well before getting pregnant. And by starting now you won't need to worry about losing a whole trimester of core and hip strengthening.

First, learn to locate and activate the core muscles. The transverse abdominals are the muscles that wrap around the midsection like a corset and are responsible for stabilizing the spinal column. The pelvic floor muscles are those which support the baby internally and assist in childbirth.

Forcefully exhale and draw in your abdominals toward the spine—those are the transverse abdominals you're working. At the same time, try to draw up your pelvic floor like an internal elevator, then slowly control the descent without activating any other muscles—these are the pelvic floor muscles. Engage the abdominal and pelvic floor muscles in the following exercises with every repetition to achieve maximum core contraction and stability. Perform the exercises every other day for best results.

1 dipping the toes

Muscles targeted: Abdominals (transverse abdominals) and pelvic floor

1. Start by lying on your back with your knees bent at a 45-degree angle. Your knees should be directly over your hips, with your shins parallel to the sky. Bend your elbows and place your hands behind your head, and then lift your head, neck, and shoulders off the floor.

2. Exhale and dip the right toe toward the floor, moving only at the hip. Inhale and return the knee to start position. Repeat this on the other leg, alternating for a total of 10 reps on each leg.



2 froggies

Muscles targeted: Abdominals, inner thighs, and pelvic floor

1. Lie on the floor with your legs turned out at the hips so that your feet are in a small "v" position at a 90-degree angle. Your elbows should be bent, and your hands resting behind your head.

2. Lift your head, neck, and shoulders off the floor and lower your legs down to the floor; keep good form as you feel your abs engage. Inhale and bend your knees toward your ears, keeping your heels together. Then exhale and extend the legs, drawing the inner thighs together. Repeat 10 times.



3 scissors with resistance

Muscles targeted: Abdominals (transverse abdominals), pelvic floor, and inner thighs

1. Lie on your back with your right leg extended at 90 degrees and your left leg placed on the floor. Lift your head, neck, and shoulders off the floor and place your left hand on the inner part of the right thigh to add resistance. Your right hand should be on the outside of the right thigh with your torso twisting toward the right side.
2. Exhale as you switch legs and move your right hand to the inner part of the left leg, twisting the torso toward the left side. Repeat, alternating sides for a total of 10 reps on each leg.



4 flutter kicks and heel beats

Muscles targeted: Glutes, obliques, inner thighs, and pelvic floor

1. Lie on your stomach with your elbows bent and fingers pointing forward next to your rib cage. Extend the upper body as you draw your shoulder blades down toward your pelvis.
2. Extend the left leg off the floor as you press your pubic bone in to the floor and extend the leg from the hip. Switch legs and repeat, alternating the legs for 20 reps on each side.

5 side plank

Muscles targeted: Abdominals (transverse abdominals), pelvic floor, glutes, and lats

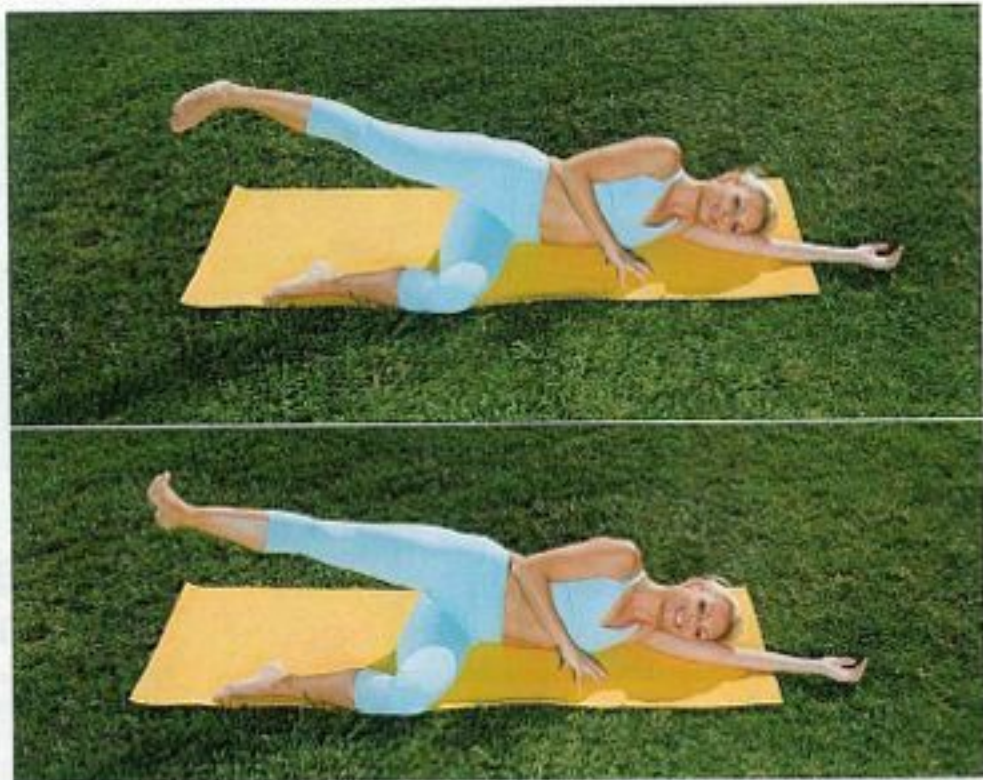
1. Lie on your left side, resting on your forearm with your left elbow bent and your fingers pointing forward. Your left leg should be bent and your right leg should be extended out to the side resting on your toe. Rest your right arm on your right hip.
2. Exhale and lift your hips off the floor as you draw your shoulder blades down toward your pelvis and lift your right leg to hip height. Reach your right arm up and over into a side stretch. Inhale and lower your hips to the floor as your right arm returns back to your hip. Repeat for 10 reps before switching to the other side.



side leg lifts

Muscles targeted: Abdominals (transverse abdominals), pelvic floor, glutes, and lats

1. Lie on your left hip with your left leg bent and your right leg extended at hip height, toes facing downwards. Rest your head on your left biceps.
2. Exhale and lift your right leg up and down, keeping your hips as still as possible by drawing in your abdominals. After 10 reps turn your toes upward and repeat before moving to the other side.



7 clams

Muscles targeted: Glutes, abdominals, and pelvic floor

1. Lie on your left hip with both knees bent. Extend your left arm and rest your head on your biceps.
2. Exhale and lift your right knee, keeping your feet together without moving your hips. Inhale and lower the legs. Repeat 10 times before switching to the other leg.