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a fit conception



for that matter, less—likely that you'll conceive or avoid miscarriage.)

To achieve that winning trifecta of a pain-free back, easier labor, and quicker postpartum recovery, you need a strong core. And what is the core, exactly? "It's made up of your deep abdominal muscles—the transversus abdominus—which act like a corset around your middle, and the small muscles in your back," explains Chantal Donnelly, MPT, a physical therapist and founder of Body Insight in Los Angeles. "Core fitness is strengthening the muscles that support and stabilize the spine."

True core-building moves focus on that deep muscle of the abdominals, not the top *rectus abdominus* muscles, which don't do much more than give you six-pack abs and help you bend forward. What's more, working the top muscles incorrectly, which many of us do, can lead to a diastasis, in which the outermost muscles separate, explains Tupler.

And don't forget the pelvic floor muscles, especially when you're trying to conceive. "These come into play because when you engage the deep abdominal muscle, the pelvic floor muscles engage too, so they're considered part of the core," adds Donnelly. Tone your pelvic floor muscles (for example, with Kegel exercises, where you contract the muscles that you use to stop the flow of urine) and you can add one more benefit to the list, too: You'll be less likely to experience continence problems after you deliver.

If you start a belly-and-back-pilates regimen now, your timing couldn't be better. "Once you're pregnant, there are a lot of precautions, especially as you get into the second and third trimesters," says Donnelly. "You won't be able to do any exercises on your stomach, for example." Or lying flat on your back. So you can make more progress, and faster, now. And your core workout may even be a little safer when you do it before pregnancy.

fertile to the core

Take the time to strengthen your belly and back now, and you'll reap the benefits throughout pregnancy and beyond. *By Lorie A. Parch*

When you're trying to get pregnant, most of your focus naturally goes to the eight or so inches that run from the top of your stomach down to your pubic bone: That part of your body is probably getting a lot of attention right now. But there's more to the belly-and-below area than hormone levels and ovulation-optimal sex. What we don't tend to consider so much are the muscles in our middles. "But if you go into pregnancy with strong abdominals, you're going to prevent back problems, have an easier time pushing during labor, and recovery is going to be better," says Julie Tupler, R.N., co-author

of *Lose Your Mummy Tummy* (Da Capo Press, 2004). Some women also say a fit belly and lower back make labor go more quickly, though research so far confirms only that overall fitness can shorten delivery times. (Alas, there's no evidence that strong abdominals make it more—or

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STOCKMPT

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"Most people do abdominal exercises incorrectly," cautions Tupler. They lurch when coming up in a sit-up or crunch, pulling on the head and neck, making it impossible to bring the belly button back to the spine and hold it there. "Every time you have a forward forceful movement on the outermost abdominal muscles, it's making the connective tissue go sideways," which ups your risk for the dreaded diastasis, Tupler says. "That weakens the support system for the back and organs, and if you go into pregnancy with the muscle separated, you'll start with that liability, which [leads to] a higher incidence of back problems and a harder time pushing in labor."

To avoid this potentially serious problem, Tupler's advice for toning the transversus abdominus, whether you're pregnant or not, always emphasizes drawing the belly button in toward the spine and holding it there while doing muscle-strengthening exercises. That doesn't mean pushing during your workouts, of course, but you do need to breathe a bit differently than most of us are accustomed to. Instead of sucking the navel in as you breathe in and then exhaling the belly forward when you breathe out, try expanding the belly as you take in air and then bring the belly back to the spine as you exhale. "If you're not bringing the belly button to the inner spine and holding it there, you're not working the core," Tupler says.

Sarah Picot, author of *Pilates and Pregnancy: A Workbook for Before, During and After Pregnancy* (Picot Pilates, 2006), believes that Pilates, an exercise program that focuses on core strength, is an especially good fit for women who are trying to conceive. "Pilates is all about circulation—getting your body's blood pumping," she explains. "So much of the work Pilates does is on the lower abdominal wall and the pelvic girdle, sending blood flow to the area that you're trying to bring life to."

Read on for three of Picot's favorite Pilates core-builders. Follow this five-minute regimen four or five days a week, and your core will be pregnancy-ready in about six to eight weeks. Remember to keep your navel drawn in toward your spine throughout each move. ■

ROLL UPS



1. Lie on your back with your feet flexed, legs together long and slightly bent. Inhale as you raise your arms toward the ceiling. Exhale and bring them over your head, but don't touch the floor.

2. Inhale to curl your head and shoulders off the floor while keeping your head between your arms. Exhale and continue rolling up, one vertebra at a time. Your legs will bend as you come up.

3. Straighten your legs when you reach the top, reach your body forward, keeping your head between your arms.

4. Inhale as you start to roll down, allowing your pelvis to tuck under. Then exhale and uncurl one vertebra at a time until you're back in the starting position. Repeat five more times.

THE HUNDRED



1. Lie on your back with your legs together and bent at a 90-degree angle, and your pelvis in a neutral position (neither tucked nor arched). Extend your arms down alongside your body, and draw your shoulders down away from your neck.

2. Inhale as your head and shoulders curl off the floor, keeping your lower back in contact with the floor as you exhale and extend your legs toward the ceiling or slightly past 90 degrees. Heels stay together and arms reach long as they float about an inch off the floor.

3. Pump your arms up and down slightly as you inhale slowly for five counts and exhale slowly for five counts. That's one set; repeat nine more times. (If this is too difficult, modify the move by keeping your legs bent in chair position or placing your feet together and flat on the floor; it's more important to control your abdominals and keep your back flat on the floor.)

KNEE FOLDS



1. While lying on your back, place your feet flat on the floor, hip-width apart. Your hands should be at your sides, palms down, pressing slightly into the floor.

2. Inhale, then exhale while keeping your hips still and floating the right leg up to a 90-degree angle, then inhale again.

3. Exhale as you float your left leg up to meet the right, so you look as if you're sitting in a chair.

4. Inhale as you lower your right leg, keeping your muscles drawn in. Exhale when your leg reaches the bottom. Inhale to lower your left leg and exhale as your left foot touches the floor. Repeat twice more, alternating legs.