

THE STRENGTH TO ENDURE

**N**atasha, the mother of 2-week-old Rory, worked hard during her pregnancy to stay fit, walking for a half hour on the treadmill every day. Her labor might have been easier, though, if she'd also spent time strengthening her abdominal muscles, the ones used most during delivery. If your stomach muscles are strong, they'll help you push out the baby, says Julie Tupler, RN, author of *Maternal Fitness* (Fireside, 1996). She recommends doing these exercises daily throughout pregnancy.

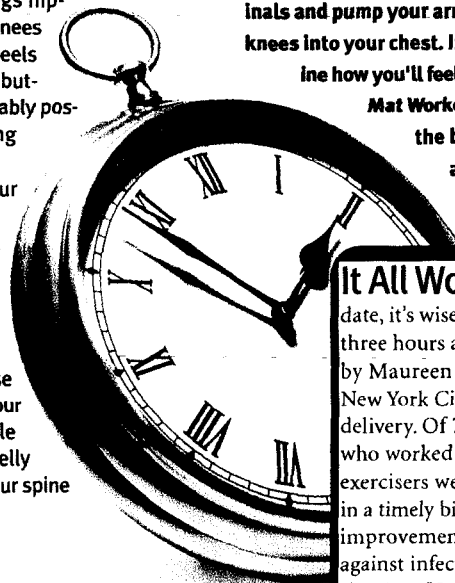


and hold. Bring your pelvis toward your navel, pull the fabric tightly, lift your head and bring your chin to your chest and count aloud. Repeat. Start with 5 repetitions; build up to 30. Do three sets.

If you're lying on your back and you feel dizzy or nauseous, roll to your side.

1. **SITTING TRANSVERSE:** Sit up against a wall or in a chair so your back is supported. Keep your shoulders aligned with your hips. Place one hand on your stomach and the other on your back with your thumb on your waist. Close your eyes and pull your stomach in as if you're bringing your belly button to your spine and then to the hand that's resting on your back. Squeeze, hold this movement for one count and then release. Repeat. Do 5 sets of 100 (sets can be done throughout the day). This helps strengthen the transverse muscle—the one that helps you push baby through the birth canal.

2. **HEAD LIFTS:** (pictured above) Lie on your back, legs hip-distance apart, knees bent with your heels as close to your buttocks as comfortably possible. Wrap a long scarf or piece of fabric around your waist. Hold it overhanded with your hands resting on your belly. Take a deep breath in through your nose as you expand your belly. Then, exhale and bring your belly button toward your spine



Strike

**A**fter the routine six-week postbaby checkup, most women are given the usual doctor's orders to return to life as they knew it before pregnancy. For some that means going back to a much-missed fitness routine. For others, one look at their new 'motherly' body may provide just the motivation they need to start a new regimen. The Pilates method, a combination of ballet-type moves that stretch and strengthen the entire body, focuses on hollowing out your abdomen, engaging your deepest stomach muscles. Though you won't get a cardiovascular workout from an hour of such exercise, you will be tightening and firming the muscles most affected by pregnancy and childbirth. As soon as the warm up (known as the 100) begins, you'll feel these muscles returning to where they should be (and isn't that just what a new mom wants to hear?). To give it a try, lie flat on the floor with your legs straight and raise them slightly lower than a 90 degree angle. Lift your head, neck, and shoulders off the mat, in a position similar to a crunch. Pull in your abdominals and pump your arms up and down 100 times. Then, roll onto your back and hug your knees into your chest. If your stomach muscles are burning, as they should be, just imagine how you'll feel after an hour-long workout. A good tape to try at home: *The Pilates Mat Workout Tapes with Linda Farel* (Stamina Products; \$30 each). Start with the beginner tape and be sure you know the positions well before you advance to the next level. For more information, call (800) 375-7520.

**It All Works Out** To prevent baby from arriving significantly before his due date, it's wise to routinely ride a bike, swim laps, or do high-impact aerobics at least three hours a week during pregnancy. A study recently published in *ObGyn News*, led by Maureen Hatch, PhD, then at Columbia University School of Public Health, in New York City, revealed that vigorous exercise during pregnancy may lead to a timely delivery. Of 717 expectant moms studied (all of whom regularly exercised), those who worked out intensely delivered within two weeks of their due date. The moderate exercisers were more likely to have a preterm delivery. It is unclear how exercise aids in a timely birth, but it's speculated that on-time delivery may occur because of the improvement in mom's muscle tone, the strengthening of the body's immune system against infection (a suspected cause of premature birth), or even the increase in fetal size. But, Hatch warns, "Don't go from being a couch potato to a long-distance runner. Build up your physical fitness level gradually (or continue at your pre-pregnancy level), and be sure that it doesn't affect your weekly weight gain."

TOP LEFT: JOHN FORTUNATO; LEOTARD AND PANTS, MIEL MATERNITY; SNEAKERS, NEW BALANCE; TOP RIGHT: SAUL LOEB