

Fab Abs

Physiotherapist **Nicky Collins** shows us how to locate, target and strengthen weak, post-pregnancy abdominal muscles

Photography: Kallan MacLeod

During pregnancy the abdominal muscles become stretched and weakened. Many mums are disappointed to see that after losing their pregnancy weight, they're left with a pot belly, especially below their belly button.

Whether you've had your baby recently or your youngest is now at school, these exercises are perfect for tightening and strengthening your abdominals. They're very gentle and won't cause stress to your lower back like more vigorous sit-ups or crunch-type exercises, which should be avoided for the first 6-8 weeks following delivery. All you'll need is five minutes twice a

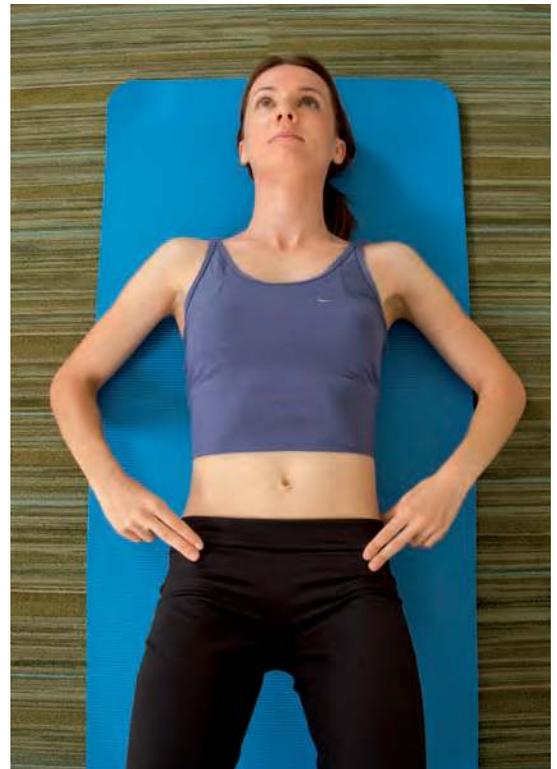
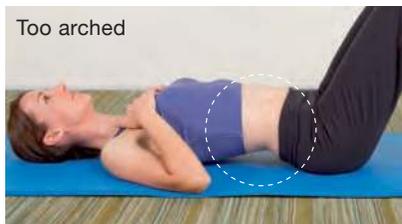
day in a quiet space, and make sure you master each stage of this programme before moving on to the next.

The muscle we're targeting is the deepest layer of abdominal muscles called the Transverse Abdominus (TVA). The TVA runs horizontally from your back to your front like a belt. When it contracts, it acts like a 'corset' pulling in around the lumbar spine and internal organs, stabilising the spine during movements involving your arms and legs. An added bonus is that with correct activation of the TVA, your pelvic floor muscles contract at the same time.

Start position

Set up your spine correctly before you start by following these four simple steps:

1. Lie on your back, with your knees bent up and your neck in line with your body.
2. Roll your pelvis all the way backwards so your lower back is flat on the floor.
3. Roll your pelvis all the way forward so your lower back is arched.
4. Find the halfway position. This is your neutral position for your lower back.



Stage 1: TVA activation

- With your second and third fingers, find the bony points on the front of your pelvis.
- Move your fingers 1 inch inwards. This is where you will feel for the TVA contraction.
- Draw your belly button towards the floor; you'll feel some tightening under your fingers as your belly button moves down. Hold this contraction for 10 seconds; breath normally.
 - Repeat 10 times, 2 sets

Tip! If you're having trouble getting this contraction, try pulling your pelvic floor muscles up and in, and you should feel the tightening under your finger tips.

Stage 2: Overhead arms

When you've mastered Stage 1 and are able to breathe normally while contracting your TVA, you're ready for the next stage.

- Start with shoulders flexed to 90 degrees, fingertips pointing to the ceiling.
 - Contract your TVA by drawing your belly button towards the floor.
- Breathe in as you extend your arms overhead so that they almost touch the floor.
 - Breathe out as you return your arms to the start position.
 - Repeat 10-15 times, 2-3 sets.

Tip! Your lower back should remain completely still while you move your arms. Once you're sure you can move your arms independent of your spine you can move to the next stage.



Stage 3: Hip flexion

- Start with your fingers on the bony points of your hips.
- Breathe in as you bend your hip to 90 degrees.
- Breathe out as you return to the start position.
- Alternate your legs. Repeat 10 times, 2-3 sets and progress to 20 times as you improve.

Tip! If you're unsure your TVA is working, stop and start over again. Monitor your bony points for any movement as you flex your hip. With a weak TVA, your bony point will drop lower on the side of the hip you are bending; this causes rotation of your spine when there should be no movement at all. Concentrate on keeping your belly button down, and slow your leg movements to keep your pelvis still. Don't move to Stage 4 until your pelvis remains still with hip movements.

Stage 4: Bent knee fall-out

- Start position: one leg straight, monitor the bony points on the pelvis.
 - Breathe in, lower one knee out to the side.
 - Breathe out and return to the start position.
- Repeat 5 times on each side and progress to 10 times each side, 2-3 sets.

Tip! Your pelvis will likely rotate towards the knee you are lowering out when your TVA is weak. Monitor your bony points and keep them parallel to the ceiling. If you're unsure if your pelvis is moving, slip your hands under each side of your lower back and feel for your back lifting off your hand. Maintain the same pressure on each hand.



Stage 5: Leg extension

- Start position: monitor your bony points.
- Breathe in as you extend one leg out straight without touching the floor.
 - Breathe out as you return to the start position. Alternate legs.
 - There should be no movement of the pelvis and bony points.
- The next stage is to raise your arms to 90 degrees (finger tips pointing to the ceiling). Repeat as above, extending your arms over your head as you straighten your leg. Be sure not to arch your lower back.
 - Repeat 5 x each leg, 2-3 sets, progress to 10 repetitions.



These exercises are all about control; you shouldn't feel any strain in your back. If you're not sure whether you're doing the exercises correctly, see your local physiotherapist.

Nicky Collins is a registered physiotherapist and owner of **New Lynn Physiotherapy** in West Auckland. www.newlynphysio.co.nz

Next issue, we'll focus on advanced abdominal strengthening to get your abs back to their full potential.