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you have diastasis recti and want to know what exercises to avoid? Keep reading to learn about the top 10 exercises that can worsen your abdominal separation and the ones you should prioritize! Diastasis recti is a condition in which the rectus abdominis muscles separate in the midline due to a weakness in the linea alba. (The linea alba is the connective tissue that holds the two sides of your abdominal wall together). As such, avoiding any exercise that overly activates the rectus muscle group (aka the six-pack muscles) is essential. These include: Exercises that flex the torso Exercises that place a lot of pressure on the abdomen Twisting movements Any activity that causes bulging of your abdomen Heavy lifting Let's go over some specific exercises to avoid if you have diastasis recti. Here are the top 10 exercises that can make your abdominal separation worse. Holding a full plank position can put a lot of abdominal pressure on the linea alba and overly activate the rectus. Modified planks or knee planks are okay as long as your abdomen doesn't bulge. Like planks, push-ups can overload the abdominal region and worsen your ab separation. You can try incline push ups if your abdomen doesn't bulge. Lifting your legs while lying on your back can cause bulging in the midline. This exercise places too much stress on the abdominal cavity in women with diastasis recti. Sit-ups directly train the rectus abdominis muscles and place too much pressure on all of the abdominal wall muscles. Avoid this movement at all costs. The V-Upright exercise requires you to lift your upper and lower body simultaneously and resembles a sit-up. Twisting motions can also put too much pressure on the rectus abdominis. The Russian twist is the most popular exercise that you should avoid. Any poses that involve a deep stretch of the abdomen, like an upward dog or a wheel pose in yoga, are not recommended. The same is true for pilates. The bicycle exercise requires you to twist and flex your spine while keeping your rectus muscle in constant tension. This move is a no-go for postpartum women. Squatting and deadlifting are great movements that you should train regularly. However, heavy lifting can also engage your abdominal wall in an unsafe way if you are not careful. Instead feel free to perform body weight squats- after all we do this every day to use the bathroom. Now, let's talk about abdominal exercises that are safe to do with diastasis recti. The most important thing to know about diastasis recti is that you do exercises to train the transverse abdominis muscle. This is the deepest abdominal muscle that wraps around your waist like a corset. The following exercises help improve core stability and help safely cinch your midline. They also help improve lower back pain! Diaphragmatic breathing is the best exercise to start with if you're suffering from diastasis recti. This exercise helps to train and strengthen your transverse abdominis muscles through slow and deep breaths. Get into a quadruped position with your hands on the floor, directly under your elbows and shoulders. Inhale and focus on expanding your rib cage and the sides of your abdomen. Next, slowly exhale and squeeze your ab muscles together. Let each inhale and exhale last ~3 seconds. To ensure that you are maximally training the diaphragm muscle, do your best not to let your shoulders move throughout the movement. Abdominal bracing is similar to diaphragmatic breathing but focuses on squeezing the deep abdominal muscles. Lie on your back and place your hands on your stomach. Take a deep breath in and then exhale. Draw your belly button in and squeeze your abdominal muscles together. Hold this position for 5 seconds, release, and repeat. You can also squeeze your pelvic floor muscles. Posterior pelvic tilts are another fundamental exercise that teaches you how to engage your transverse abdominis and keep your pelvis in good alignment. Lie on your back with your knees bent and feet flat on the floor. There should be a natural curve in your lower back. Now, engage your core and tilt your pelvis, so you flatten out the curve in your lower back. Hold this neutral spine position for 5 seconds, release, and repeat. You can also add a glute bridge to this exercise once you feel comfortable. Heel slides are a great introductory exercise for teaching you how to engage your transverse abdominis and lower abdominal muscles while moving your legs. Lie on your back with your knees bent and feet flat on the floor. Engage your core and posteriorly tilt your pelvis. Next, slide one heel out, keeping your core engaged. Slowly return to starting position and repeat with the other leg. 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tummy” after pregnancy if left unhealed. Related: Postpartum Exercise-How To Heal Your Body The Right Way Here is what you will learn today. The problem with traditional ab exercises (or are they?) Ab exercises to avoid postpartum 5 Alternative Moves To Core Let’s get started!

Disclosure: Although I am a certified prenatal/postnatal exercise specialist and personal trainer, I am not YOUR trainer. The content on this blog is for informational purposes only and should not be a substitute of the information and advice you receive from a healthcare professional. This website does not replace the medical advice you receive from your provider. Did you know that 100% of women will have abdominal separation during pregnancy? This is just our bodies natural process of making room for the growing baby. But here’s the issue. If those muscles do not come back together on their own, you’ll be left with a condition called “diastasis recti.” Traditional exercises such as crunches, planks, v-ups or leg lifts are not doing you any favors in healing your core. In fact, they could be making your condition worse. Yep! These exercises cause an increase something called “intra abdominal pressure” and they place too much strain on a weakened post-pregnancy core and thin connective tissue called the “Linea Alba”. When this tissue gets stretched too thin, it can leave you dealing with incontinence, pelvic organ prolapse, lower back pain and a dreaded “mummy tummy”. So, the first step is to use this simple self test to identify if you have DR. Lie on your back with your knees bent and feet flat on the floor. Place one hand behind your head for support and the other hand on your stomach with your finger tips on the midline of your abdominal area. Take an inhale and on the exhale, perform a simple crunch and hold it at the top. Now take your fingers and feel for a gap between the two hemispheres of muscles. The separation can occur at in several places along the linea alba so make sure you feel for a gap from just below your rib cage to below your belly button. Measure how many finger tips wide is the gap? The degree of separation is measured by finger widths and it is present if the gap is 2.5 finger widths wide at 6 weeks postpartum or several months postpartum. Your core muscles are a big deal! They are the protectors of your spine and pelvis, the supporters of your breath, the maintainers of your posture and the guardians of your organs. Those who are dealing with Diastasis Recti may not be able to provide the same level of support and stability which can lead to injury, excess pressure on the pelvic floor muscles and poor posture. These are the most problematic exercises: (*perform with caution) As you review the following exercises, keep in mind that this is just a generalized list of exercises to be cautious about if you have an unhealed diastasis. Your ability to perform them correctly is dependent on several factors such as: Pre-pregnancy fitness level Degree of abdominal separation Depth of abdominal separation Delivery method Overall core strength Crunches? Not The Best Idea Crunching involve a flexion movement of the spine which can place significant pressure on abdominal wall and the thin connective tissue between the rectus abdominis muscles. The repetitive motion of the crunch exercise without proper core engagement can cause the connective tissue to stretch further apart, making Diastis worse. However, we use a crunch movement in many day-to-day tasks such as getting out of bed, bending forward to pick something up, or tying your shoes. So, this is not a movement we can completely avoid. Instead, we need to focus on exercises that target the deep abdominal, specifically the transverse abdominis muscle and help to re-establish core stability. Crunching exercises include: Sit-ups traditional crunches bicycle crunches Planks? Not So Fast! During a plank or push-up, the abdominal muscles are responsible for holding the body in a straight line, preventing the low back from sagging and keeping the pelvis stable. However, someone with diastasis recti may find it difficult to keep their core engaged throughout the exercise without feeling a lot of pain or pressure in the abdominal area. If these muscles cannot function properly, there will be excess pressure on the abdominal wall which can cause further stretching and weakening of the connective tissue making the condition worse. A weak core can also strain the back muscles leading to pain or injury. Plank exercises include: Burpees Push-ups Renegade Rows Yoga poses such as chaturanga Related: Planking During Pregnancy-How To Do It Safely and Effectively Lifting Heavy Objects? Approach with Caution It is almost impossible for new moms to avoid lifting after pregnancy. I mean hello, you have a new baby to carry. However, heavy lifting should be avoided as much as possible, especially during the first 6-8 weeks postpartum where your body is still healing. Lifting heavy objects significantly increase intra-abdominal pressure which can place too much stress on both the core and pelvic floor. Twisting Exercises? Maybe Avoiding rotational exercises such as Russian twists or bicycle crunches with depend on your individual situation and the severity of the diastasis. Twisting movements can stress the linea alba and make it more challenging to heal your diastasis. However, we need to be able to twist safely so our back muscles do not lock up and become tight. Tight back muscles, especially in the midback, can affect proper breathing mechanics which can slow the healing process. So twisting movements may not need to be avoided completely but perform them with caution, listen to your body and feel for any signs of discomfort. Leg Lifts? Not Yet! Leg lifts are an advanced abdominal exercise. They require a significant amount of core strength to protect the low back and integrity of the linea alba. During a leg lift exercise, the core must be able to maintain a neutral position as the legs descend toward the ground. Someone with a diastasis will not be able to hold this position and the linea alba will be placed under excessive tension. Running? It Depends! Your core and glutes work together to stabilize the pelvis when you run. If you have a diastasis, then your core become ineffective in stabilizing your pelvis. When pelvic stability is lacking, a whole slew of problems can arise. From IT band syndrome, knee pain, hip pain, to incontinence and pelvic floor dysfunction, muscles tendons and ligaments must all work together to provide proper stability and function. If one of those links is weak, other systems have to compensate which can lead to injury over time. It’s like having one lazy person in a game of tug-of-war. If everyone isn’t pulling their weight, others have to compensate which leads to more wear and tear than others. So when it comes to high-impact exercises like running, it is important to restore strength and function of the core to prevent regression in the healing process. Other exercises to be cautious about if you have diastasis: Yoga or pilates poses that involve stretching of the core, planking or push-ups. V-ups Push-ups Unilateral lower body exercises such as lunges or bulgarian split squats. While this list of exercises to avoid may make you feel limited on what you can do to heal your core, the good news is that there are a lot of abdominal exercises you can do if you have diastasis. The goal of these gentle exercises is to strengthen the trasnverse abdominis muscle. This is the deepest core muscle that helps regulate intra-abdominal pressure, acts as a corset or internal back brace. Toe Taps This exercise helps strengthen the deep core muscles as well as the pelvic floor muscles. Lie on your back with your feet up, knees stacked over the hips and shins parallel to the ground. Engage your transverse abdominis muscles and on an inhale lower your right toes toward the ground, focusing on using your core to prevent movement in your pelvis. Only lower until you find it difficult to keep your core engaged. Exhale and bring your leg up to meet your left leg and repeat on the other side. As you get stronger, slightly straighten your legs as you lower. Once you can straighten your legs as you lower, try doing both at the same time. Dead Bugs With Exercise Ball Once you have toe taps down, you can add in arm movements which will create more tension on the core. Lying on your back with your feet up, knees stacked over the hips and shins parallel to the ground with a stability ball between your hands and your knees. Engage your core on on an inhale, lower your right toes to the ground keeping your knee bent while simultaneously lowering your left arm. Pressing into the ball with your opposite hand and leg. Lower as far as you can without losing core engagement an on an exhale, bring your arm and leg to the center. As you get stronger, begin straightening the leg. Repeat on the opposite side. Pelvic Tilts with Pilates ball This is the foundation of every single ab exercise. Placing a yoga ball between your knees helps activate the TA muscles so you can feel them working. Begin on lying on your back with your knees bent and feet flat on the floor. Place a small pilates ball between your knees. Place your hands in a diamond shape around your belly button. Imagine you have a marble in the center of the diamond shape. Inhale and gently squeeze the ball between your knees an tilt your pelvis pelvis with your core muscles so that the marble rolls toward your thumbs. Hold for 3-5 seconds and on an exhale, allow the imaginary marble to fall toward your finger tips. Continue tilting your pelvis back and forth for 8-10 reps. Glute Bridge Once you feel strong in the pelvic tilt, you can progress to the glute bridge. Perform a pelvic tilt as instructed above followed by lifting your hips off the ground by using your core and glute muscles. Keep your pelvis tilting toward your ribcage and avoid overarching your back. Hold at the top for 3-5 seconds then lower Repeat 10 repetitions. Cat/Cow This exercises is similar to pelvic tilts but performed on your hands and knees. It is important to work the core in all differentness angles and positions so that the core and provide support and stability in all planes of movement. Begin on your hands and knees. Stack your shoulders over your wrists and hips over your knees. On an inhale, relax your core and allow your belly to sink toward the ground while slightly looking up. Exhale and engage your core (think pelvic tilt) to bring your pelvis toward your ribcage and arch your back up toward the ceiling. Press the ground away from you with your hands and take your gaze down to the floor. Continue moving through these two positions for about 10 repetitions. Bear Hovers with Pilates Ball Once you feel strong doing a cat/cow exercise, you can progress the exercise to bear hovers. Begin on your hands and knees. Stack your shoulders over your wrists and hips over your knees. Place a pilates ball, pillow or yoga block between your knees. On an intentional exhale, gently squeeze the object between your knees to activate your TA muscles and perform a slight pelvic tilt, bringing your pelvis toward your ribcage. Use your core to lift your knees off the ground so that your shins are parallel to the floor. Inhale and lower. Repeat for the duration of the interval. Supported Side Plank Side planks target the oblique muscles which help in rotational movements. Begin lying on your side, resting your upper body on your forearm. Bend your bottom knee for support while keeping your legs stacked on top of eachother. Exhale to and engage your core as you lift your core off the ground. Hold your body in a straight line for 10-20 seconds then lower. Repeat for the duration of the interval or reps then repeat on the opposite side. Seated Lean Backs Leaning backwards challenges the transverse abdominis muscle and rectus abdominis muscle to prevent you from falling back. (I teach this exercise in more depth in my postpartum core rehab program.) Sit on a sturdy chair or bench with your bottom slightly toward the edge of the seat. Sit tall with your chest up and shoulders relaxed. Exhale to engage your core muscles and slightly lean your body backwards. As you lean back, watch your core to notice any coning or loss of core engagement. Hold for a breath then return to the starting position. You will be able to lean back further the stronger your core becomes. Elevated plank Elevating your body helps take the pressure off your core during a plank. The closer you are to the ground, the more the core has to work to stabilize the pelvis. Place your hands on a counter top, chair or bench. On an intentional exhale, engage your core and step your legs behind you so that you are in high plank position. Focus on maintaining core engagement. If you cannot keep your core engaged, try a higher angle. Hold for 5-10 seconds then return to the starting position. Repeat 5-10 repetitions. Once you are able to perform these exercises without any pain or pressure in the abdominal area then you can begin incorporating more advanced exercises such as leg lifts, v-ups and russian twists. Diastasis Recti is something you definitely do not want to ignore! A weak and dysfunctional core can cause many problems including: Urinary incontinence Pelvic floor dysfunction Pelvic pain Pelvic organ prolapse or worsen an existing prolapse Painful intercourse Hernia Poor posture Hip pain Chronic low back pain A mummy tummy you can’t get rid of despite diet and exercise Hopefully you can see that healing your post-pregnancy core goes way beyond aesthetics! I know first-hand that having diastasis recti can be discouraging, especially when it comes to getting back into your regular exercise routine. But don’t throw in the towel just yet! The truth is, with the right plan and proper guidance, you can strengthen your core safely and effectively, even if you have diastasis recti (DR). Focusing on the combination of correct breathing techniques, pelvic floor exercises, and specialized core strengthening exercises, you can get back to the exercises and workouts you love. With the right modifications, you can still maintain a healthy exercise routine while also supporting the body’s healing process. With the guidance of a core corrective exercise specialist or physical therapist who is knowledgeable about core and pelvic floor health, you can strengthen your core and get back to do the activities and workouts you love. I’m here if you need help! Brooke is a certified Prenatal and Postnatal Exercise Specialist with a Bachelors of Science degree in Kinesiology-Exercise Science. She is also a mom of 3 girls with more than 15 years of experience in health and fitness. Brooke’s goal at Struggles of a Fit Mom is to help motivate, educate and inspire other busy mamas who struggle with finding time, energy and motivation to take care of themselves in the chaos of motherhood.