

POST BABY SHAPE UP

Suzie Skipper, mother of four, fed up with never going to the gym and expensive personal trainers investigates the best workouts for mums. **Illustrations by Charlotte Cleveland**

Every woman knows that her body changes once she's had a baby or three! For the most part I'm happy to accept those now faded stretch marks that signify the birth of each of my wonderful children but I must admit to feeling a teeny bit jealous when I see various A-listers squeezing back into their skinny jeans weeks after giving birth. OK, I know I don't have a whole army of personal trainers, stylists and nutritionists to make me look good but I'd settle for 70% or even 60% of my former figure.

So two and a half years after the birth of my fourth (and last child) I ditched the gym and went on a mission to explore the best possible exercise options for the postnatal woman. I tried Pilates, yoga, zone specific exercises and even a bootcamp. Postnatal, by the way, just means anything from 6 weeks to 6 years or even more so there's no excuse!

Boot camp

The idea of going on a proper residential bootcamp filled me with utter dread as I've never really acquired the exercise bug and can barely do a push up. So I consoled myself with the fact that the Trimmer You Boot camp in the Peak District is the only 5* luxury women-only one in the country (and previous inmates had suggested that the food portions were a bit more generous than other bootcamps...). I went with a friend but you could easily do it alone as the comradeship you build up during 'tougher moments' is great.

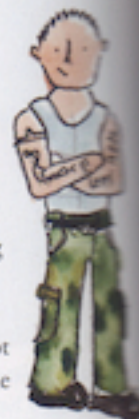
Days start at 5.30am and often end with a 40-minute hike at 8pm. Lights out at 9.30pm couldn't come soon enough. At times I felt I simply couldn't go on but the encouragement of the staff and fellow bootcampers always spurred me on and I somehow discovered reserves of energy and mental fortitude that I did not know existed. Our instructors were military servicemen; strict but good natured and most importantly they made activities fun so that half the time you forgot you were burning calories. Having been utterly hopeless at most team sports at school I surprised myself during a rather competitive game of netball (maybe I should take it up again).

Meal and snack times are hugely important when you are on 1250-1300 calories a day and burning 3000-4000. The food was much better than I had expected. Tasty, nutritious and interesting and I never felt really famished. I must stress that although this wasn't a postnatal bootcamp any injuries were taken seriously and the knowledge imparted by the staff about stretching will stay with me for life. If you're after a bootcamp that is tough but caring at the same time then Trimmer You is for you. I lost pounds and inches and came away much fitter but more importantly feeling really proud of myself and determined to keep on exercising. All in all, a good experience for both physical and mental well being.

Read more about my bootcamp experience at angelsandurchins.co.uk

Cost: £895-£1200 depending on room type/sharing. Book before 31 March and quote 'angels and urchins' to get a 30% discount.

Good for: Kick starting fitness regime, mums of older kids.



Cupcakemum's bootcamp class

If you haven't got time to dedicate to a bootcamp sojourn then try out Cupcakemum's 'bootcamp' class. Marina warmed us up with a run to the park then put us through our paces with interval training, squats, sit ups and lunges. It'll definitely get your heart rate up and the good news is that it's all over in 45 minutes...phew!

Cost: Membership from £26/week, treatments (available to non-members too) from £30.

Good for: All over workout in 45 minutes, outdoor types



Pilates

If you thought Pilates involved just a bit of stretching and breathing then think again. There are two types: Dynamic Pilates, which uses equipment such as a sliding platform (reformer bed) and mat Pilates.

Londoners are spoilt for choice as the three leaders in **Dynamic Pilates** – Beautcamp, Heartcore and TenPilates – all run classes across the capital. None have specific postnatal classes.

TenPilates recommend that you do a session with a personal trainer before joining a class and I did an hour with Chris. Just by looking at me he could tell what was out of line and what I needed to work on. He explained that reformers use springs, pulleys, and your body weight to create resistance to give a full body workout and long lean muscles.

Next up was a class at Beautcamp, where I got into positions I didn't think were possible and left feeling exhausted but wonderfully stretched. "Re-training your tummy should be done from the inside out, strengthening the deep postural muscles," says postnatal Pilates expert Sam Gurner. Dynamic Pilates studios offer a wide range of reformer-based classes including 'cardiolates', 'spinlates' and even 'pilates on the piste'!

Triyoga also does Pilates classes and I had a 1-1 session in Primrose Hill (which has a crèche and organic café too) with postnatal Pilates expert Charlie Snitcher. Triyoga also has a 'wonder chair', fantastic for toning your stomach and legs. I'm hoping to fit one in my kitchen...

Cost: £48-£80 1-1, £18-27 group

Good for: Fast-paced core toning, calorie burning, posture.

To get the most out of **mat classes**, either make sure the class size is small or treat yourself to a 1-1 session first. I tried out a class at triyoga's Soho studio with uber-experienced Yalckun (an ex-ballet dancer). I assumed

Pilates on a mat would be a breeze after the machines but using your own body weight as resistance is pretty tough too. Yalckun says that the ideal way to get in shape post baby is aim for two Pilates and one cardio workout once a week. If you want to try Pilates at home, Scott Pilates 'Post Natal Pilates' DVD comes highly recommended.

Cost: £14 drop-in or £110 for 10 class pass @ triyoga **Good for:** Everyone, core strength, posture.



Yoga

My only experience of yoga was over 20 years ago when my friend and I joined a class in the vain hope that it would help relax us before our 'O' levels. We spent most the class giggling as we attempted to breathe in through one nostril and out through the other... Thankfully, yoga has evolved since then with some great classes for postnatal mums.

If you've just had your baby then a **mother and baby class** is a must. Not only does it give you the impetus to get dressed and out of the house but you also get to meet other mums. At Tara Lee's class at the Life Centre you get to do lots of lovely yoga stretches and tummy toning while your baby lies on a cushion in front of you. Tara then cleverly switches over to baby yoga with a few nursery rhymes once they start getting a bit fidgety. Lolly Stirk and others do similar classes. If you can't get to a class then try Tara's new postnatal yoga DVD

taraleeyoga.com. The 10-minute quick



fix is perfect for busy mums.

Cost: £14 **Good for:** Babies up to crawling, toning, stretching, socialising.

Bikram Yoga, done in a room heated to 40 degrees with 60% humidity, sounded like my idea of hell. But I have to admit I felt so fantastic after each 90-min session that I think I could easily become hooked. Classes are based on 26 (Hatha yoga) postures and were simple enough even for a novice. My neck and shoulders felt as though I'd had a massage and even my skin looked better after just one session. Mum of three, owner and founder of Hot Bikram, Olga Allon, says this type of yoga is "such a great way to build core strength and flexibility while the heat adds a detoxing element". Olga reckons that you will see real results in a couple of weeks if you manage to do two classes a week. If you're a new and/or breast feeding mum take advice from your midwife/doctor first.

Cost: Drop-in £14 (introductory offer 10 consecutive days for £15) **Good for:** Core strength, detoxing and flexibility.

Workout with the Xbox

If your kids got an Xbox 360 for Christmas then make use of it while they're at school by working out with new fitness game 'Your Shape'. It uses the clever new 3D 'Kinect' sensor that tracks your whole body on screen and unlike fitness videos it's virtually impossible to cheat as it tells you to raise your arms higher or squat lower! There's a good variety of classes from workouts with celebrity trainers or your own personal trainer to yoga and cardio boxing. I loved the 10-minute 'Skinny Jeans' workout. It caters for men too. I'll be getting mine to try out the "Men's Health Fat Loss Workout" while the kids mow the lawn. **Cost:** £39.99 (you need an Xbox + Kinect £230). **Good for:** Home workouts without cost of personal trainer.

