

Bump it off

Mums hoping to regain their figures after childbirth should do so only with a sensible diet and exercise

By Gladys Chung

Bathed in the evening sun, Hollywood star Penelope Cruz shows off a svelte figure in a lacy white Dolce and Gabbana bodysuit in the pages of this month's US Vogue.

As she is an A-list actress, Cruz's trim figure is not surprising - except that the 37-year-old had given birth to her first child just weeks before the photo shoot.

She is one in a long line of celebrities who seem to have a knack for whipping their post-natal bodies back into awesome shape in no time at all.

But before you start giving yourself grief for not having a body like hers while your newborn coos in the crib, Dr Ann Tan of the Women and Fetal Centre at Paragon offers a dose of reality: 'With plenty of help with the baby, a dietician to take care of meals and a personal trainer, it's not a problem for Hollywood celebrities to get into shape.'

The rate and extent of one's post-natal weight loss also depend on what state one was in before the pregnancy. 'There are many factors, from the mother's weight and fitness before she conceived, to whether she develops any medical disorder such as thyroidism and diabetes during the pregnancy,' says Dr Tan.

Also, after the mother has her second or third child in her 30s, her body will not snap back into shape like it did after her first child when she was in her 20s, says Dr Lee Keen Whye of the KW Lee Clinic and Surgery for Women at Gleneagles Medical Centre. 'Her metabolic rate is different due to her age. Plus, her body expands more easily from the second pregnancy onwards.'

That said, women need to watch the weight they put on during pregnancy or it could haunt them later.

Doctors say how much weight a woman puts on during pregnancy is the strongest predictor of how much weight she will retain.

A woman with a healthy weight should gain no more than 10 to 16kg during the pregnancy term.

Dr Lee observes that averaged-sized mothers - for example, those 1.6m tall with a body-mass index of 20 - who put on more than 13kg will usually find it more difficult to get back into pre-pregnancy clothes.

He says: 'For one thing, their pelvic bone expands more to accommodate a growing baby and to support the heavy and bigger upper body. Just like a rubber band that has been stretched too much, it will be difficult for their hips to go back to their original size.'

Pregnant women should keep a sensible diet with reasonable food portions, and maintain some level of activity throughout pregnancy.

After 12 weeks into her term, a mother who feels good and does not bleed can start exercising with some antenatal yoga, light swimming or brisk walking. Those used to workouts can continue to do so till the 36th week of their term when they get too heavy for exercise. But they should tone down their regimen, avoid working out intensely for more than half an hour, and shun activities that cause their body temperatures to rise.

And the myth about expectant mums eating for two should be laid to rest. 'The food goes to the mother, not the baby. Eat what's right for you,' says Dr Lee.



Former TV presenter Jamie Yeo regained her pre-pregnancy weight of 48kg through a diet that includes fish and brown rice, hourly gym sessions twice a week with a personal trainer and carrying her 7kg daughter, Alysia. -- ST PHOTO: ASHLEIGH SIM --

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Former model Lum May Yee, 38, who gave birth to her first child in March, did exactly that. 'I ate healthily. My diet consisted of steamed fish, lean pork and vegetables. I also tried to stay away from junk food.'

She gained 10kg throughout her pregnancy and lost the extra weight two months after her son's birth.

A woman loses about half of her gestational weight gain - made up mostly of baby, placenta and fluids - in the first six weeks after giving birth, says Dr Wee Horng Yen, director of the Women Wellness Centre at the KK Women's and Children's Hospital.

After that, it can take anywhere from six months to a year for her to get back her pre-pregnancy figure if she works at it, says Dr Choo Wan Ling, who owns a women's clinic at the Gleneagles Medical Centre.

Some believe breastfeeding helps because it is 'a calorie-zapping activity', she says. But not all women will find this to be the case as breastfeeding mothers usually have a good appetite and might overeat.

But breastfeeding has other perks, such as strengthening the bond between mother and child and producing oxytocin, a hormone that helps the uterus to contract, says Dr Lee. 'That's why some mothers feel a cramp in their womb while breastfeeding.'

Former ESPN Sports presenter Jamie Yeo, 33, who gave birth to her first child in November last year, says breastfeeding helped her get back in shape quickly. 'I had a lot of milk pumped and my uterus shrank so quickly, it hurt,' says Ms Yeo, who put on 11kg before her daughter was born prematurely, at seven months, and lost 8kg two months after childbirth.

Traditional massages and wraps may also help mums regain their figures. 'The massages encourage fluid drainage and improve circulation, while the wraps encourage better posture and tone,' says Dr Tan.

Ultimately, there is no shortcut to getting one's figure back.

Crash dieting is not encouraged, says Dr Choo. 'The pregnancy and delivery process is a stressful period for the body and it is important to have a healthy diet to help the body recover well, replenish the iron and calcium stores and build the immune system.'

A balanced diet is especially important for mothers who are breastfeeding as the quality of the milk depends on it, she adds.

When it comes to exercising, taking it easy is the rule of thumb. Dr Tan says most women can start exercising only about six weeks after their delivery.

Running and hardcore gym work should be avoided until the mother has regained the core strength in the stretched abdominal and pelvic muscles. 'If not, the exertions might push the pelvic floor even lower and cause vagina laxity,' warns Dr Tan, who recommends starting with simple pelvic floor exercises.

Women who had Caesarean sections should postpone exercise to eight to 12 weeks after childbirth, says Dr Choo. 'This is to ensure that the internal layers of the abdominal wall are fully recovered.'

For Ms Lum, she has yet to start exercising because she has her hands full with the baby. She does, however, go for 30-minute walks with her son twice a day.

Getting back in shape is not a priority for her, says Ms Lum, who stopped reading fashion magazines while she was pregnant 'because I won't be wearing those clothes for a while'.

'And where do you have to go after giving birth? I have no life and when I have time, I just want to go to sleep,' she says. 'I think it's okay to look a bit dowdy for now. The baby doesn't mind.'

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