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Learn How To Lose Weight While Breastfeeding the Healthy Way

Between recovering from childbirth and caring for a newborn, postpartum weight loss can be tricky. Here's what to know.

By **Sonia Pierre, MD, RDN** | Updated on May 21, 2024
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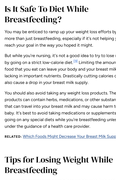
People who want to lose weight while breastfeeding should never restrict or calories, as a healthy caloric intake is necessary. Drastically cutting calories could also cause a drop in breast milk supply, and lead to fatigue and subsequent snacking to stay awake. The healthy way to lose weight while breastfeeding is to implement light, moderate exercise, get plenty of rest, and prioritize whole nutritious foods.

Breastfeeding offers many benefits for both babies and nursing parents. One of these potential benefits is supporting healthy postpartum weight loss. Gaining weight during pregnancy is normal and healthy, and some people who have added weight will be lost with the birth of your baby and the physiological changes that follow, extra fluid weight will also be lost around. That's OK!

For many people, their postpartum body feels different and unfamiliar. While it's important to embrace your postpartum body and all that it does, losing some weight after pregnancy is a common goal for many new parents.

Between recovering from childbirth and caring for a newborn, postpartum weight loss can be tricky. Even with weight loss as a goal, you still need to consume enough calories to fuel your body and maintain your milk supply. If you're breastfeeding, it's important to learn how to lose weight while breastfeeding—the healthy way.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Losing Weight While Breastfeeding

Breastfeeding will not instantly help you lose body fat. The initial weight loss you'll see immediately after childbirth will include the weight of the baby, the placenta, amniotic fluid, and excess water, which accounts for about 15 to 17 pounds in the first few weeks. But breastfeeding will help to contract your uterus and shrink it back down to its pre-pregnancy size much more quickly.

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How Many Calories Does Breastfeeding Burn?

Breastfeeding burns up to 500 extra calories a day, above and beyond the calories your body burns if you're not breastfeeding. This means that even though you are probably eating more to support breastfeeding, you may still lose weight. In fact, studies show that people who exclusively breastfeed for at least 3 months after giving birth have a greater weight loss at 12 months postpartum.[1]

Factors That Affect Postpartum Weight Loss

The amount of weight that you'll lose while you're breastfeeding depends on many factors including, but not limited to:

- Your activity level
- Your eating habits
- Your overall health
- Your pre-pregnancy weight
- How much weight you gained during pregnancy

If you're taking in the recommended number of daily calories while exclusively breastfeeding, you can expect to lose about 1 pound every week or two on average. That might not sound like a lot, but experts agree that already, gradual weight loss is the safest and healthiest.[2] Plus, you're more likely to maintain a healthy weight if you lose extra weight gradually.

Is It Safe To Diet While Breastfeeding?

You may be enticed to ramp up your weight loss efforts by doing more than just breastfeeding, especially if it's not helping you reach your goal in the way you hoped it might.

But while you're nursing, it's not a good idea to try to lose weight by going on a strict low-calorie diet.[3] Limiting the amount of food that you can eat lower your body and your breast milk lacking in important nutrients. Drastically cutting calories could also cause a drop in your breast milk supply.

You should also avoid taking any weight loss products. These products can contain harmful ingredients and other substances that can travel into your breast milk and may cause harm to your baby. It's best to avoid prescribing weight loss supplements or going on any special diets while you're breastfeeding unless it's under the guidance of a health care provider.

RELATED: Which Foods Might Decrease Your Breast Milk Supply?

Tips for Losing Weight While Breastfeeding

While some postpartum people lose weight with little added effort while breastfeeding, for others, postpartum weight loss requires more. In addition to breastfeeding, you can support healthy, gradual weight loss with some lifestyle changes, including:

- **Exercise:** Talk to your health care provider about adding exercise to your routine once you have been delivery. If you had an uncomplicated, spontaneous vaginal delivery, you should be able to begin doing some light or moderate exercise by about 6 weeks postpartum. If you had a cesarean section, it will take longer to heal, so you will need to wait longer to begin an exercise program.
- **Diet:** While there aren't "good" foods and "bad" foods, some foods offer a lot in the way of calories but not much in the way of nutrients your body needs. Enjoy those foods in moderation and aim to increase your intake of nutrient-dense foods like fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.
- **Sleep:** Sure, getting enough sleep is easier said than done for a breastfeeding parent of a newborn, but try to rest when you can. Research shows that lack of sleep can lead to difficulty losing weight and weight gain.[4]

Do your best not to worry about losing weight in the first several weeks after giving birth. In fact, most experts recommend waiting until at least after your postpartum checkup (which is usually about six weeks after delivery) to start to lose weight intentionally and gradually.[5] Instead, focus on eating a well-balanced diet and getting enough rest. Your body needs extra energy and nutrition to recover from childbirth and fuel milk up a healthy supply of breast milk for your baby.

If weight loss is a goal, you can consult with a health care provider, lactation consultant, or registered dietician around your first postpartum checkup to plan a healthy, sustainable weight loss plan that includes enough nutrition for you and your baby.

RELATED: Best Foods for Breastfeeding Parents

When To Talk to a Doctor

If you're having trouble with postpartum weight loss after adjusting your diet, adding exercise, and getting more sleep, it may be time to see a health care provider.

A health care provider can help you identify what adjustments you can make to help you safely lose weight while breastfeeding. Additionally, there could be a medical reason affecting your ability to lose weight such as stress,[6] postpartum depression, an underactive thyroid, or another hormone imbalance. If that's the case for you, you may have more weight loss success once the underlying issues are treated.

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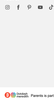
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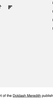
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