

# MAINTAINING PHYSIQUE AND PHYSICAL FITNESS IN PARENTHOOD – A GUIDE FOR NEW PARENTS

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## INTRODUCTION

Becoming a parent is an exhilarating journey, but it also comes with a unique set of challenges that can make maintaining physical fitness a daunting task. New parents often find themselves juggling the demands of round-the-clock caregiving, sleep deprivation, and the myriad responsibilities that come with raising a child, all of which can take a toll on their mental, emotional, and physical well-being. In fact, the potentially harmful changes in behavior associated with early parenthood including poor diet, low physical activity, and sleep deprivation can have a long-lasting impact in shaping health trajectories into midlife (4). For both men and women, the transition to parenthood can be a turning point for obesity since the weight gained is typically maintained long term (7,8,20). Therefore, prioritizing self-care and maintaining a regular fitness routine is crucial during this transformative period. Yet, this is easier said than done, and achievable fitness goals with a flexible workout schedule must be established. It is also important to adjust expectations during this time as it is probably not the time to plan on training to become a world-class powerlifter or top-tier bodybuilder. Nevertheless, maintaining both physical and mental health can be achievable with the right mindset and the incorporation of some practical strategies. The purpose of this guide will be to provide several tips for new parents seeking to maintain their physique and physical fitness during the demanding time of early parenthood. It will also provide evidence-based training and nutrition strategies for practitioners working with this population.

## AEROBIC TRAINING, INTERVAL TRAINING, AND EXERCISE “SNACKS”

To maintain cardiorespiratory and muscular fitness, the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) recommends that adults engage in moderate-intensity aerobic training for at least 30 min per day at least five days per week for a total of more than 150 min per week, along with performing resistance training 2 – 3 days per week (6). Breaking away from parenting responsibilities for this duration of time is often not feasible for new parents and time is a common obstacle to achieving the recommended dose of physical activity. Therefore, alternative, time-efficient strategies are needed to reduce physical inactivity.

## EXERCISE SNACKS

It is now recognized that engaging in physical activity in brief intervals throughout the day is just as beneficial as longer, continuous exercise sessions (14). Short bursts of physical activity performed throughout the day (referred to as “exercise snacks”) are a time-efficient strategy to promote physical activity and improve health for new parents. Unlike traditional aerobic workout sessions that are typically longer and more structured, exercise snacks involve brief, manageable periods of exercise, such as a few minutes of brisk walking or bodyweight exercises (10). These short intervals of activity can be more easily integrated into daily routines, offering health benefits similar to those associated with longer, continuous bouts of aerobic training. They are especially helpful for new parents with busy schedules, providing a way to break up prolonged periods of inactivity. These short bursts of physical activity can include stroller walks, bodyweight exercises (e.g., squats, push-ups, calf raises), or simple resistance training activities (e.g., free weights, resistance bands). Adding several short exercise bouts throughout the day can accumulate to be just as effective as one long, steady-state cardio workout.

## INTERVAL TRAINING

For new parents, it may be unattainable to meet the physical activity guidelines through moderate-intensity continuous training (MICT), generally described as using a moderate intensity of <80% peak heart rate or aerobic capacity performed over a longer single bout of training. High-intensity interval training (HIIT) has emerged as a more time-efficient and enjoyable mode of exercise for inducing fat loss and cardiorespiratory fitness, as compared to MICT (9). HIIT involves the use of multiple shorter bouts of high-intensity exercise (>90% aerobic capacity) interspersed with recovery periods either at lower intensities of effort or as complete rest. For example, the duration of each interval performed at a high-intensity can range from five seconds to several minutes depending on the work-to-rest ratio, and a typical HIIT session can last from 5 – 30 minutes, with work-to-rest ratios varying from 1:1 – 1:8 depending on the individual’s ability. A recent meta-analysis indicated that HIIT and MICT result in virtually identical changes in body composition with similar adherence among participants; yet, results with HIIT are accomplished in less than half the time as with MICT (19). While HIIT is time saving and a

TABLE 1. TIME-EFFICIENT STRATEGIES FOR NEW PARENTS TO INCREASE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY (6,9,14,19)

STRATEGY	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE
Exercise snacks	Short bursts of physical activity throughout the day	Incorporate several brief rounds of bodyweight exercises into the daily routine
Interval training	Use of multiple shorter bouts of exercise interspersed with recovery periods either at lower intensities of effort, or as complete rest	Perform eight 12-s cycling sprints rather than cycling for 30 min at a moderate, steady-state intensity

good option for new parents struggling to find time to exercise, the trade-off is that it requires higher intensity of effort and can lead to more pronounced training fatigue. However, since new parents may not be exercising at a high frequency, they should be able to adequately recover between exercise bouts. Nevertheless, individuals should use HIIT only after they have established a firm aerobic base, and it should be appreciated that the absolute amount of fat loss induced from both HIIT and MICT alone is relatively small (19). Thus, if the goal is weight loss, an energy deficit induced from dietary restriction should be the primary focus. Table 1 provides examples of exercise snacks and interval training.

## RESISTANCE TRAINING STRATEGIES FOR TIME-EFFICIENT WORKOUTS

Resistance training is a critical component of an overall fitness regimen to help maintain or improve strength, muscle mass, bone mineral density, and body composition. As previously stated, the ACSM recommends for adults to perform resistance training 2 – 3 times per week. Furthermore, traditional strength training prescription recommendations per the ACSM for untrained, novice, and intermediate lifters involves performing 1 – 3 sets per exercise for 8 – 12 repetitions using ~70 – 85% of their one-repetition maximum (1RM); this increases to 3 – 6 sets per exercise for 1 –

12 repetitions using ~70 – 100% of the 1RM for more advanced lifters. Considering the recommended rest periods of ~1 – 5 min between sets depending on the goal, traditional resistance training sessions may require ~45 – 75+ min to complete (13). However, there are various time-saving strategies that can be implemented to provide similar results as traditional strength training protocols. Table 2 provides effective time-saving strategies for resistance training programs.

Various studies have investigated the effectiveness of these time-saving strategies as compared to resistance training programs (1,2,5). Regarding muscle hypertrophy specifically, these studies have found that some time-saving strategies are at least as effective at gaining muscle mass as compared to traditional resistance training programs when volume is equated. Notably, a superset protocol can be completed in 36% less time compared to traditional protocols, with similar overall performance and muscle gains (2). Selecting exercises with minimal muscular overlap (e.g., agonist/antagonist supersets, upper/lower body supersets) can be a smart approach to allow for quality training volume within a confined timespan. Additionally, drop set training has been shown to be a more time-efficient training strategy (30 – 80% less time) compared to traditional protocols while achieving similar effects on muscular strength and hypertrophy (3). Another reasonable

**TABLE 2. TIME-SAVING STRATEGIES FOR RESISTANCE TRAINING (1,2,5,12,13)**

STRATEGY	HOW TO DO IT	EXAMPLE
<b>Agonist/Antagonist Supersets</b>	Choose an exercise for an agonist muscle group and do a set. Rest 30 – 60 s and proceed to an exercise for the antagonist muscles and do a set. Rest 30 – 60 s and repeat 2 – 5 times.	Flat dumbbell chest press
		Rest 60 s
<b>Upper/Lower Body Supersets</b>	Choose an upper body exercise and do a set. Rest 30 – 60 s and proceed to a lower body exercise and do a set. Rest 30 – 60 s and repeat 2 – 5 times.	Bent over barbell rows
		Rest 60 s
<b>Drop Sets</b>	Choose an exercise and go to failure/near failure then drop weight (usually ~10 – 20%) to perform more repetitions until failure/near failure with minimal rest between the sets. Repeated 2 – 4 times.	Repeat 2 – 5 times
		Dumbbell shoulder press
<b>Rest-Pause Sets</b>	Choose an exercise with a weight you can be within 2 – 3 repetitions shy of failure in ~12 – 15 repetitions. Rest ~20 s and repeat the exercise with the same weight for 3 – 5 repetitions. Continue to rest ~20 s followed by 3 – 5 repetitions until it is no longer possible to do 3 – 5 repetitions.	Rest 60 s
		Dumbbell walking lunges
<b>Drop Sets</b>	Choose an exercise and go to failure/near failure then drop weight (usually ~10 – 20%) to perform more repetitions until failure/near failure with minimal rest between the sets. Repeated 2 – 4 times.	Rest 60 s
		Repeat 2 – 5 times
<b>Rest-Pause Sets</b>	Choose an exercise with a weight you can be within 2 – 3 repetitions shy of failure in ~12 – 15 repetitions. Rest ~20 s and repeat the exercise with the same weight for 3 – 5 repetitions. Continue to rest ~20 s followed by 3 – 5 repetitions until it is no longer possible to do 3 – 5 repetitions.	Perform leg press to failure/near failure with 400 lb. Lower weight by 10% (360 lb) and immediately repeat the leg press to failure/near failure.
		Repeat 2 – 4 times
<b>Drop Sets</b>	Choose an exercise and go to failure/near failure then drop weight (usually ~10 – 20%) to perform more repetitions until failure/near failure with minimal rest between the sets. Repeated 2 – 4 times.	Perform lat pull downs with a weight that you will be 2 – 3 repetitions shy of failure within 12 – 15 repetitions.
		Rest ~20 s
<b>Rest-Pause Sets</b>	Choose an exercise with a weight you can be within 2 – 3 repetitions shy of failure in ~12 – 15 repetitions. Rest ~20 s and repeat the exercise with the same weight for 3 – 5 repetitions. Continue to rest ~20 s followed by 3 – 5 repetitions until it is no longer possible to do 3 – 5 repetitions.	Keep weight the same, but do 3 – 5 repetitions.
		Repeat the rest ~20 s and completing 3 – 5 repetitions until you cannot complete 3 – 5 repetitions

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approach to a time-efficient workout would be to restrict inter-set rest intervals. Although, longer rest periods between sets may yield a slight advantage for strength and hypertrophy, gains can be achieved across a wide spectrum of rest interval ranges (18). During early parenthood, stepping away from what is optimal for what is practical can be a good trade-off. Similar to HIIT, these time-saving strategies require a higher intensity of effort and may lead to more pronounced training fatigue and soreness. Again, the lower training frequency of a new parent should allow for adequate recovery between exercise bouts.

Other possible time-saving strategies can include choosing more multi-joint exercises and less single-joint exercises to recruit more muscle groups with the same exercise. As an example, instead of choosing to do a dumbbell chest fly followed by a triceps extension, performing a dumbbell chest press can target both the pectorals, deltoids, and triceps in one movement. Moreover, if it is possible to use more machines or pre-loaded bars, this can save the time it takes to rack and unrack the weights. Collectively, all of these strategies can help to significantly cut down on the time required to complete an adequate resistance training program.

NUTRITION CONSIDERATIONS

Maintaining a nutritious diet during the early stages of parenthood is essential for sustaining energy levels, promoting physical recovery, and supporting overall well-being. As new parents adapt to the demands of their roles, it can be challenging to prioritize nutrition amidst the chaos. As previously stated, the transition to parenthood can lead to unwanted weight gain that can be maintained long term (4). However, strategic meal planning, mindful eating practices, and proper hydration can help mitigate these challenges and ensure parents remain healthy and energized. Let’s explore a few strategies.

MEAL PLANNING AND PREPARATION

For new parents, finding time to prepare nutritious meals can be difficult. Research has shown that meal prepping can significantly improve dietary quality by reducing the reliance on convenient, often less healthy, food options (12). Preparing meals in advance allows parents to have healthy options ready to go, reducing the temptation to opt for fast food or snacks that are high in calories but low in nutritional value.

Simplifying recipes to include fewer ingredients can save time and reduce stress, which is crucial during this busy period. A study on meal preparation behaviors found that individuals who frequently cook at home have healthier diets and often consume fewer calories, less sugar, and less fat than those who rely on pre-packaged or restaurant foods (21). Opting for meals with minimal ingredients, such as sheet pan dinners or slow-cooker recipes, can streamline the cooking process, make it easier to stick to a meal preparation routine, and help to maintain a balanced diet. Table 3 shows a few key strategies for new parents to promote a healthy diet.

IMPORTANCE OF PROTEIN AND SMART SNACKING

Adequate protein intake is vital for maintaining muscle mass, particularly when physical activity levels might be reduced due to parenting responsibilities. Studies have consistently demonstrated that a higher protein intake can aid in weight management by promoting satiety and preserving lean muscle mass (11). Including protein-rich foods such as Greek yogurt, eggs, and lean meats in every meal can help parents stay fuller for longer and prevent overeating. Table 4 shows some high-protein options that parents can easily incorporate daily into meals or snacks.

TABLE 3. KEY STRATEGIES FOR NEW PARENTS TO PROMOTE A HEALTHY DIET (4,12,21)

STRATEGY	DEFINITION (OR REASON)	EXAMPLE
Batch Cook Proteins	Preparing large quantities of protein in advance to simplify meal prep.	Cook large batches of chicken, ground turkey, or tofu for different meals throughout the week. Repurpose the same protein source for multiple meals (e.g., chicken tacos and chicken sandwich).
Simplify Recipes	Reducing the number of ingredients in meals to save time and effort.	Make a sheet pan dinner with chicken, sweet potatoes, and broccoli.
Carry a Water Bottle	Encourages regular hydration, which is essential for energy and focus.	Keep a reusable water bottle on hand to drink throughout the day.
Incorporate High-Protein Snacks	Ensures quick access to nutritious snacks that sustain energy levels.	Have Greek yogurt, cottage cheese, boiled eggs, or a protein shake ready for convenient snacking.
Practice Portion Control	Helps prevent overeating by managing portion sizes effectively.	Use smaller plates and fill half with vegetables, a quarter with protein, and a quarter with complex carbohydrates.
Pause Before Eating and Use Fullness Scale	Encourages mindful eating by assessing hunger and fullness before meals or snacks.	Take a moment to evaluate hunger levels to avoid eating out of habit and stop when you are full by using a fullness scale.
Pre-Portion Snacks	Helps resist the temptation to overeat or snack on your baby’s food.	Prepare small bags of nuts or fruit for easy, controlled snacking.

## IMPORTANCE OF MINDFUL EATING

Mindful eating practices can help new parents avoid the common pitfalls of overeating or finishing off their child's leftovers. Mindful eating is about becoming aware of the food choices one makes. Mindfulness in eating has been associated with better dietary choices and reduced caloric intake, as it encourages individuals to listen to their body's hunger and fullness cues (17). By taking the time to assess hunger levels before eating and practicing portion control, parents can better manage their food intake and maintain a healthy weight. Consider using a 0 – 10 fullness scale to assess feeling of fullness after consuming a meal where "0" is starving and "10" is uncomfortably full (ideally, 10s should be avoided).

Snacking can be a double-edged sword for new parents. While snacks can provide a quick energy boost, it is important to choose snacks that contribute positively to overall nutritional intake. Research suggests that snacks combining protein, fiber, and healthy fats can help regulate blood sugar levels and sustain energy throughout the day (16). Preparing balanced snacks like apple slices with almond butter or a handful of berries with Greek yogurt can help curb hunger and prevent the energy crashes that often lead to unhealthy food choices and overeating.

## IMPORTANCE OF HYDRATION

Dehydration can exacerbate feelings of fatigue, making it even harder for new parents to keep up with their daily tasks. Drinking adequate water is crucial, especially for breastfeeding mothers, who have increased hydration needs. According to the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, women should aim for about 2.7 L (91 oz) of water per day, while men should target about 3.7 L (125 oz) (15). Carrying a water bottle and setting hydration goals can help ensure that parents stay adequately hydrated.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, navigating the challenges of parenthood while striving to maintain your physique and physical fitness requires a blend of flexibility, strategic planning, and motivation. The demands of caring for a newborn can make it difficult to adhere to traditional physical activity guidelines but adopting time-efficient training strategies like exercise snacks, HIIT, and supersets can make training goals attainable. Similarly, practical approaches to meal planning and mindful eating can help ensure that both parents and their families enjoy balanced diets despite a hectic schedule. By focusing on achievable goals, leveraging evidence-based practices, and integrating small but effective changes into daily routines, new parents can maintain, and even improve, overall health, general fitness, and body composition. Ultimately, maintaining a positive mindset and prioritizing self-care are key to navigating this transformative period with resilience and vitality.

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**TABLE 4. HIGH-PROTEIN OPTIONS THAT PARENTS CAN EASILY INCORPORATE INTO MEALS OR SNACKS (4,11,12)**

PROTEIN OPTION	ESTIMATED PROTEIN CONTENT	TIP
<b>Greek Yogurt</b>	10 – 15 g per serving	Choose plain, unsweetened Greek yogurt and add fresh fruit or a drizzle of honey for flavor
<b>Cottage Cheese</b>	12 – 14 g per half cup	Top with pineapple, berries, or a sprinkle of cinnamon for added taste
<b>Hard-Boiled Eggs</b>	6 – 7 g per egg	Prepare a batch ahead of time for an easy grab-and-go snack
<b>Tuna or Salmon Pouches</b>	15 – 20 g per small pouch	Choose low-sodium options and pair with whole-grain crackers or veggies
<b>Edamame</b>	8 g per half cup	Steam and sprinkle with sea salt or other seasoning
<b>Protein Bars</b>	10 – 20 g per bar	Look for protein bars with minimal added sugars and high-quality protein sources
<b>Grilled Chicken Breast</b>	25 – 30 g per 4 oz	Add to salads and wraps, or serve with roasted vegetables
<b>Lean Ground Turkey</b>	22 – 24 g per 4 oz	Use in tacos, meatballs, or mixed into pasta dishes
<b>Tofu</b>	10 – 15 g per 4 oz	Stir-fry with vegetables, add to soups, or grill as a meat substitute
<b>Salmon or Other Fatty Fish</b>	22 – 25 g per 4 oz	Bake, grill, or poach and pair with a side of quinoa or a fresh salad
<b>Lentils</b>	18 g per cup (cooked)	Incorporate into soups, stews, or use as a base for salads
<b>Black Beans or Other Legumes</b>	15 g per cup (cooked)	Add to rice bowls, tacos, or blend into a dip



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