

back in shape

writer **Laura Miller**

What's the answer to dropping those pregnancy pounds? Is it simply a matter of returning to your pre-conception diet, skipping carbs in the evenings and stepping out on a treadmill? Unfortunately it's a little more complicated than that. But there are ways and means of getting back to pre-baby form. Laura Miller takes you on her journey.

Babies love mirrors. New mothers, generally, do not. Carrying and delivering a child is awesome in every respect, but it does take its toll physically, especially in the short term. Gone is that basketball belly you were so proud of for nine months. Instead you have a tummy as firm as a deflated balloon. And as for your thighs and bottom? They seem to have blossomed in the shade. This is completely normal of course – and only temporary. But with *Hello* and *OK* magazines showing us what Heidi, Posh and even Colleen look like seemingly within weeks of popping out a sprog, we all want to be yummy mummies – ASAP.

They say nine months on, nine months off when it comes to baby weight. But I'm impatient. And lucky. Six months in, I looked like I was back to normal. But I had that whole skinny-fat thing going on – i.e. in clothes I looked good, but underneath it was another story. An extra two kilos were lurking about and refusing to budge, and a whole heap of flabbiness had piled up in the thigh, bottom and stomach areas. This meant I was struggling to fit into my pre-

baby wardrobe. I'd heard your body changes permanently with childbirth and it was just something you had to accept, along with the fact that every child adds two kilos to your body weight – permanently. Had I really lost it for good? Was this the trade I had to make for welcoming a beautiful bundle of joy into my life? Could only celebrities look good post-baby? Bollocks to that, I wanted it all. So I set out to find a real solution to getting rid of those last few kilos – always the hardest to lose.

THE FIRST THREE MONTHS

Let it be said: I loved being pregnant and I loved experiencing childbirth. I didn't even mind the way I looked after the arrival of our gorgeous baby girl. I was the embodiment of fertility in the Venus von Willendorf sense – big boobs, big tummy, big everything. I've never been big on 'big' before, but I was so high on motherhood and the absolute miracle of procreation that I couldn't care less.

I soon got the hang of breastfeeding – a serious challenge in itself – and it did what it was supposed to do: chubbing up our angel to cherubic perfection, and helping me to start losing weight. Breastfeeding stimulates the uterus to contract (helping you regain that flat tummy you're after) and burns a huge amount of calories. In fact, a breastfeeding mother needs to eat 500 calories more than normal every day, and we're talking hearty normal, not salad normal, to sustain her milk supply. I devoured everything edible in sight at all hours of the day and night for months after the arrival of our daughter. A case in point: After witnessing me in action for just three weeks, my lovely helper decided to make two cakes in honour of my mother's arrival: One for me, and one for everyone else.

This general euphoria lasted until about week four when it came to a first celebratory dinner out with my husband. Desperate not to wear maternity clothes AGAIN, I tried on just about everything else in my wardrobe and ended up in tears. A maxi-dress and red-eye drops later, I was ready to go – and ready to start thinking about my figure.

I had gained 13 kilos during my pregnancy (it's normal to gain between 10 and 15 kilos) and produced a bouncing four-kilo baby. Imagine my surprise when I stepped on the scales at the doctor in week five and found that a further six kilos had gone. And that while eating like a piglet! I couldn't believe my eyes – or how effectively breastfeeding was strip-

ping off the baby weight. But how could I be just three kilos more than usual and not fit into any of my clothes? What's more, I got a talking to from my doctor for dropping weight too fast (as if I'd had any role in it). She told me that if I wanted to keep on breastfeeding (which I did), I needed to, and I quote: "Start eating like a construction worker." It's not often a girl gets the green light to chow down on bacon 'n eggs and Mars Bars so I was happy to oblige.

I couldn't help but notice the irony here. As thrilled as I was to find myself within kilos of my pre-baby weight, I'd have been devastated if my milk supply dried up. And there's the rub. You simply can't get too skinny too quickly post-baby if you want to breastfeed. And clearly it's worth breastfeeding as apart from the obvious benefits to your baby, carrot cake (and brownies and curries and sandwiches) condense into breastmilk extremely efficiently it seems.

So I was three kilos over my pre-baby weight and obviously more bulky than usual (especially in the boob and hip departments). Roll on the six-week checkup – exercise was on the cards again! For your first six weeks post-partum, you can't exercise (possibly longer if you have a C-section). But even after getting the go-ahead from your doctor at six weeks, you need to choose your activities carefully.

Many women experience pregnancy-induced rectus diastasis – a very common separation of the abdominal muscle above or below the belly button. You need to treat these muscles right after delivery for them to fuse back together, otherwise you risk permanent separation with the wrong exercises. Your body is also still flooded with relaxin – an amazing hormone that aids the delivery of your baby, but also a ligament loosener that could turn you into a permanent pretzel if you attempted power yoga too soon. And then there's the pelvic floor. For many moms this area needs special attention after birth. Sneeze-induced incontinence is embarrassing – even if it's apparent to no one else.

Add breastfeeding to the exercise equation, and you're faced with a serious Catch 22: Breastfeeding helps you to lose weight, but means postponing hardcore exercise as this can jeopardise your milk supply. Formula feeding on the other hand, doesn't have the same weight-loss benefits for you (or, many would argue, the same benefits for your baby), but it means you can start that rigorous Bootcamp workout sooner. Many mums



THIS PAGE: Seven months pregnant with my husband, Rob. OPPOSITE PAGE: Holidaying in Phuket three months after delivery.

these days are keen to breastfeed for the recommended six months, and pride themselves on making this milestone. I was one of them. But my word, I wanted my figure back too!

I took myself off to the 4,500-square foot Flex Studio in Aberdeen, Hong Kong, and in no time at all the state of my core had been accessed, reminding me anew that Pilates really is one of the most intelligent forms of exercise around. I had mild rectal diastasis about three centimetres above my belly button and Heather Shalabi and Victoria Nicholson coached me through a series of seemingly simple exercises I could do at home. These would help flatten and strengthen my stomach, without causing the separation to widen, or my ribs to permanently expand. They then showed me a few for my butt and thighs – problem areas number two and three.

It was around this time that I came across a serious temptation: HYPOXI. Revered by the likes of Madonna and Cheryl Cole, HYPOXI is an innovative two-fold therapy for the effective shaping of targeted areas of the body. It is based on the theory that fat loss is difficult where circulation is poor, making the body less likely to convert and transport fat from that area than elsewhere. As well as being used as a weight-loss regime for areas sensitive to fat and cellulite build-up such as the hips, thighs, buttocks and stomach by increasing circulation in those areas, it can be used to 'exercise' skin, maintaining





THIS PAGE: HYPOXI treatment in progress. OPPOSITE PAGE: (top to bottom) Seven months post-HYPOXI with my daughter Lexie on Silverstrand beach; and Lyndsay Rothwell leads a Pilates class at Fletcher Pilates.

firmness and elasticity.

I visited the HYPOXI studio in Central, and was seriously impressed. The HYPOXI cardio machines looked slick and space-age and the passionate directors knew their stuff. It also made sense. By gently cycling in a pressure-controlled chamber which alternately created vacuum and compression, circulation was increased in those areas of the body which usually remain chilly during exercise (thighs, bum, tummy), thereby increasing the body's ability to burn fat in those areas. And the results were quantifiable. Three 30-minute sessions a week would show centimetre and weight loss by the end of the first month, they claimed. And you'd be measured and weighed each time to make sure. "You don't pay for the temporary feel-good factor a spa provides," said Managing Director Julia Lohmann, "but for a safe, non-invasive alternative to liposuction." I was sold.

Along with the exercise sessions, you have to follow a few simple eating guidelines for the HYPOXI programme to be effective. These include banning carbs for dinner (but eating them for lunch), and avoiding sugar and caffeine. "Why do I have to restrict my diet – even slightly – if the HYPOXI machines are supposed to work such miracles?" I asked. Julia confirmed HYPOXI as a realistic weight-loss solution with her answer: "You can only lose weight if you reduce your calorie intake – fact. HYPOXI helps you to target the resulting weight-loss in the areas you'd like to lose it."

But I was a sleep-deprived, breastfeed-

ing new mum, regularly eating carrot cake in the middle of the night. And I wouldn't be able to use the HYPOXI Dermology skin-conditioning machine (usually used for 20 minutes prior to the 30-minute exercise session) until I stopped breastfeeding. I knew where my priorities lay. HYPOXI would have to wait.

SIX MONTHS IN

By six months our daughter had two teeth and was tucking into all sorts of new foods and flavours. Breastfeeding was done, my body was my own again and three kilos had become two kilos. But as every woman will agree, two extra kilos might as well be 10 when it comes to looking in the mirror and being satisfied. I didn't want to complain, because for all intents and purposes I was a skinny mother of a six-month-old baby – an enviable position to be in for sure. But...I didn't like being heavier, and even my more normal diet (no midnight snacks) and regular running wasn't shifting the unwanted duo. The time had come to give HYPOXI a whirl. And so I arrived for the first of 13 sessions.

Standing in front of a full-length mirror in your underwear while another woman takes your measurements could be embarrassing, but Julia made it a breeze. Explaining more about HYPOXI as she went, she mentioned a 2010 study by the Medical Prevention Center Hamburg in Germany confirming the effectiveness of the HYPOXI method. With his team at University Hospital Eppendorf, Prof. Bamberger examined the effectiveness of the HYPOXI method, a combination of

pressure therapy and moderate fat-burning exercises, on 20 overweight women (aged 30-50). The study participants were divided into two groups. The first completed a four-week training course on a conventional bicycle ergometer, while the other group trained with the HYPOXI Trainer S120 (cycling machine). The comparison after four weeks showed significantly better results in the problem zones in the HYPOXI group: these women lost on average 13.1cm around their hips, buttocks and upper thighs, while those in the control group lost only 4.8cm. Pretty convincing stuff.

With my measurements taken, I stepped on the scale. A very respectable 56.3kg. But it was the skinny fat and bulk bothering me, rather than the numbers. Would HYPOXI trim the centimetres and show it with a kilo reduction? Time would tell.

Next was the relaxing part of the treatment. 20 minutes on the HYPOXI Dermology machine. This involved climbing into a loose-fitting suit, then lying on my back on a comfortable lounge and being connected to the machine via the suit. As the lights dimmed and gentle music played, all the air was sucked out of the suit, and 400 vacuum chambers activated to apply a deep massage – focusing particularly on the hip, buttock and stomach areas.

The theory is that this machine exercises the skin, retraining elastic fibres to result in smoother, more toned skin. Based on Traditional Chinese Medicine's manual cupping therapy, this has 100 times the effect over a much greater surface area. The unique alternation of high and low pressure stimulates circulation and lymphatic drainage, thereby encouraging the supply of oxygen and nutrient-enriched blood to the tissue. This leads to an increase in cell activity and regeneration, resulting in smoother skin with less cellulite. Possibly the first time in six months that I'd had a moment to myself – I fell blissfully asleep.

20 minutes later, it was time for the active part of the session. Climbing out of the Dermology suit, I next donned a heart-rate monitor, a thermometer around my upper thigh and what looked like a neoprene tutu. I then stepped onto the pedals of the HYPOXI S120 machine, which closed over the lower half of my body, making a tight seal with the tutu. Julia punched my programme into the display unit and handed me an iPad, and for the next 30 minutes I gently cycled, making

sure not to exceed 75rpm, while browsing Facebook – another first in six months!

What I found most interesting was the sensation of pedalling as the pressure in the chamber changed. As one would imagine, it was much easier to pedal in the low pressure created by vacuum therapy, in contrast to pedalling when high pressure was applied – compression therapy. The science behind it is this: The application of low pressure draws the blood into the dermal layer and fatty tissue, boosting circulation. This allows blood enriched with nutrients and oxygen to enter the problem areas and effectively transport toxins and burnt fatty acids away from the region. The application of high pressure promotes the transport of the fatty acids in the blood to the muscles, where the burning of fat takes place. This form of therapy also relieves pressure on the veins and the lymphatic organs. 30 minutes was up too soon, and after checking that my temperature had increased by several degrees (a key indicator of increased metabolic workout), I trotted off home.

I was ravenous. But Julia had warned me that a HYPOXI workout increases the appetite and I managed to wait the recommended two hours before eating – drinking water in the meantime. To maximise the amount of free fatty acids your body metabolises during and after HYPOXI, it is important you don't consume any carbohydrate-based foods after your session. But refreshingly, HYPOXI takes the nutritional standpoint that carbo-



hydrates are an important source of energy and should form part of a healthy diet. It is therefore recommended that a small portion of complex carbohydrates be consumed one to four hours before a HYPOXI session – at breakfast or lunch. This could be brown rice with vegetables, natural muesli with skim milk, a wholegrain salad and turkey sandwich or even plain homemade popcorn. Eating before a HYPOXI session ensures that your body maximises your fat-burning workout and prevents fatigue. Starving yourself would be counter-productive. The last rule is perhaps the hardest: no alcohol or sugar after a HYPOXI session. But with only three sessions a week, and only 12 more on the cards, surely I could adhere to this?

My second HYPOXI session was two days later and I'd lost 100 grams. Not particularly significant. But at my fourth session, exactly a week after my first, I weighed 55.2kg. One kilo down in a week, with just a few changes to my diet. HYPOXI seemed to be doing the trick!

I was still eating my usual oatmeal porridge with honey for breakfast, then having a cup of rooibos tea and a biscuit or apple as a snack mid-morning. I was eating complex carbs for lunch – for example, a whole wheat toasted sandwich with cheese and tomato with a heap of iceberg lettuce – a personal favourite, followed by a small yoghurt or handful of raw almonds in the afternoon. For dinner I was trying to be carb free, with protein (fish or chicken mainly) and veggies. But I hadn't been religious about this, with a veggie lasagna sneaking in. And on the weekend I'd had a good few glasses of wine

with some visiting friends in town.

A further drop to 54.9kg on my eighth session resulted in overconfidence on my part. It was just too easy it seemed, and I became increasingly lax with the nutritional aspect of the programme. This, combined with the wrong time of the month, meant two sessions with no further loss. With gentle admonishment from Julia, and some serious personal berating, I got back on track and by my 11th session, I had lost two kilos. Would it be reflected in centimetres, too? Because of a trip to South Africa, I couldn't make the last two of my scheduled sessions, so Julia took my measurements. In total, I had lost 14 centimetres from my thighs, hips and stomach – making my HYPOXI experience a resounding success.

I left wondering what could have been if I'd been stricter with the eating plan and finished all 13 sessions. But I was happy with the results and convinced of HYPOXI's efficacy. Here I was, mother to a beautiful seven-month-old baby girl, and back at my ideal weight – two months early. Amazing what a bit of patience when it's needed, a dose of self-control when the time is right, the healing of Pilates and the helping hand of a revolutionary targeted exercise programme can do for one. Bring on baby number two! 🌱

HYPOXI Hong Kong
The Body Buddies
www.thebodybuddies.com

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