In order for your body to accommodate your growing baby during pregnancy the outer core muscles at the front of the stomach, the Rectus Abdominus (RA) also known as the “six pack”, stretch vertically causing them to separate (see above right). This separating can lead to the appearance of a dome shaped tummy after birth as the abdomen and internal structures are not adequately contained. This separation is known as Diastasis Recti and is common during pregnancy but its extent varies from mum to mum. Generally the RA returns to a similar state to pre-pregnancy but in some cases they need some extra help, your GP/midwife may have referred you to see a physiotherapist who prescribes exercises to shorten the RA.

Many women think the solution to toning their tummy after pregnancy is to do the classic sit up, however this may actually add to the dome effect in their mid section. The sit up is primarily an exercise that strengthens the rectus, the very muscle that has separated, and can stop it from re-aligning properly. For this reason it is important to avoid any crunching or oblique exercises until the rectus muscle has recovered sufficiently. In order to close and realign these muscles it is important to do pelvic tilting exercises to shorten the muscles as they have been stretched by pregnancy, once this has been done you can move on to strengthening the muscles in the correct position.

Also during pregnancy and childbirth the deeper core muscles can be weakened. The deep core muscles are the Transverse Abdominus (TVA), Pelvic Floor, Diaphragm and Multifidus (see above left). These muscles act like a corset like structure and are important for creating intra abdominal pressure during exhalation and helping protect the spine when moving the limbs. As these muscles are weakened other muscles step in to take their role, again the RA may be recruited, stopping it from realigning correctly. It is imperative to re-educate deep core muscles (such as the TVA and Pelvic Floor) to engage correctly before doing exercises to shorten the RA.
How to recruit the TVA

- Stand upright with shoulders relaxed and soft knees
- Find your hip bones with your fingers then move them in and slightly down
- Press gently and cough
- You should feel the TVA muscles engaging
- Now you can practise without coughing: take a deep breath in ensuring you relax all the stomach muscles allowing the abdomen to inflate and the ribs expand, as you exhale gently contract the TVA and pull up the pelvic floor
- Make sure you do not grip in the buttocks, abdomen, shoulders or hold your breath
- You should only contract the TVA and pelvic floor gently as forcing tension in the area may recruit the wrong muscles, such as the RA, which should remain relaxed

Once you have mastered this you can move on to learning to exercise these muscles when sitting, lying and on all fours as well as incorporating arm and leg movements. Although it may seem that these exercises do very little it is important to re-educate the deep core muscles if you wish to be able to rectify the stretching of the outer core muscles. Once correct firing of these muscles is achieved you can start pelvic tilting exercises to shorten the RA.

Continue to practise TVA and pelvic floor activation, especially when you are lifting, coughing and standing up. It may take a few weeks or even months to notice a difference but stick at it and you will have a firm base from which to progress to more advanced exercises. Most importantly only exercise in line with what your midwife/physiotherapist/doctor has recommended.

It is also important to recognise that Mummy Tummy is not always just a result of Diastasis Recti. In women the stomach is a common place for fat to be stored, there are no exercises that can spot reduce fat. Regular cardiovascular exercise, core stability, resistance training and a healthy diet are crucial to fat loss. Relaxation is also important as studies suggest that the stress hormone cortisol can contribute to the laying down of fat in the abdominal area.

For more information an excellent resource is “The Complete Guide to Postnatal Fitness” by Judy DiFiore (preferably the 3rd edition).