

# Women in postpartum PT take baby steps to fitness

## Successful Fort Bragg program to go Armywide

By Kelly Kennedy  
STAFF WRITER

Weeks after soldiers have given birth, Master Sgt. Ruby Murray still admonishes them to “Push!” every morning during her Postpartum PT Program at Fort Bragg, N.C.

“Every day when they leave, they’re soaking wet,” she said, hooting with laughter. “They’re doing things you just don’t expect women who just had babies to do.”

Female soldiers have six months after giving birth to get back to the Army’s fitness standards.

But according to the Defense Women’s Health Research Program, about half of them don’t pass their physical training test, and about one-third of them don’t meet weight and body-fat standards within the time limit.

Rather than head straight back to their units for PT after six weeks’ convalescence leave, women in the Postpartum PT Program exercise with other women who have recently had babies. A certified fitness instructor, a medical expert and several exercise leaders at each post know what recently pregnant women can and can’t do for exercise, give them advice on nutrition and losing baby fat, and monitor their progress.

“I’m hoping to see this Armywide,” Murray said.

She’s not the only one. According to Lisa Young, health educator and fitness instructor for the Army’s Center for Health Promotion and Preventive Medicine, an Armywide program is in the works.

“It’s been proven to be a successful program,” Young said.

It’s not just about health. With some mothers choosing to take a “Chapter 8” — the Army regulation that allows women to leave the service after having a child — postpartum PT may help keep women in the Army.

Young said if women do well physically, they’re more likely to stay in, rather than give up because they’re having a hard time meeting the standards.

And, because 10 percent of female soldiers are pregnant at any given time, the researchers recommended implementing a “mandatory, graded postpartum PT program specifically targeting this population.”

“It’s almost policy now,” said Teresa Hall, chief of the Health Promotion Policy Board. “But there are resources we need to implement to make it across the board.”

So far, manuals have been creat-



MAJ. SONISE LUMBACA/ARMY

**Master Sgt. Ruby Murray, an automated logistics specialist with the 1st Sustainment Command, helps a postpartum PT soldier use proper technique during an abdominal strengthening exercise session.**

ed for the instructors and medical experts, as well as for the soldiers themselves, but the Army is still working on training. Young has traveled to 10 installations so far this year to train instructors, and said two-thirds of all major installations have the program up and running.

Instructors are chosen from women who have recently gone through the program, and who then go through a two-day certification program.

Murray said she didn’t know there was such a program when she started taking new mothers under her wing — but she did know how difficult it was to make her way back to fitness.

“After I was pregnant in 1998, I spent a lot of my own money joining a female gym and getting a personal trainer,” said Murray, an automated logistics specialist with 1st Sustainment Command. “I had to lose 90 pounds.”

She built a program for herself, and then other soldiers started to tag along. She outfitted her new moms in Postpartum PT T-shirts, and the group laughed as they left other PT groups in the dust.

“My girls were exceeding standards within 90 days,” she said.

Soon after her 1998 pregnancy, Murray was appointed primary instructor of the Postpartum PT Program at Fort Bragg. When she went to a new base in Korea, she implemented a postpartum program with another soldier. Since 2004, she has been the lead instructor at Fort Bragg — with a break for a tour in Iraq.

But Murray’s leadership is un-

usual: Instructor positions are usually six-month additional duty spots, and the appointed position takes a lot of extra time. Murray volunteered to stay on. “It’s a huge additional duty — it’s a post duty,” said Sgt. Maj. Robert Mendiguren, Murray’s boss.

Mendiguren said Murray’s dedication keeps the program strong, as well as her ability to make it fun. And, her soldiers have a 98-percent “go” rate on that first required PT test, he said.

“I was a first sergeant for a long time, and the truth of it is, there’s a lot of guys who haven’t had success [leading] this program,” he said. “I never had the success rate. Maybe it takes a female, or maybe it takes someone who has had a few children.”

Or maybe it’s Murray’s special brand of “tough love.”

“My first day, I thought, ‘Oh God, I am not going to like this woman,’” said Sgt. Tracy Devault, of Womack Army Medical Center. “She did not allow slack. But she’s actually a great motivator.”

Davault’s baby boy was born in May, and she had some work to do: She gained 75 pounds while pregnant. She has lost 54 pounds in four months.

Staff Sgt. Laura Kirk of Headquarters, 82nd Airborne, had a baby boy in February.

“A lot of male soldiers look at females like it’s time for them to get out if they have a baby,” she said, “or at least they thought so until they did PT with us. [Murray] pushes you when you think you can’t go any farther,” Kirk said. □



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