

Postnatal exercise - issues to consider

Regular exercise for the new mother offers a range of health benefits. These benefits include a speedier return to pre-pregnancy weight, and increased ability to cope with the demands of a newborn baby. **Always** consult with your doctor or midwife before starting any postnatal exercise program. Whether or not you are ready to exercise depends on individual factors. For instance, you may be advised to wait until your six-week postnatal check-up. In other cases, especially if you were exercising regularly throughout your pregnancy, you may be able to return to exercise sooner than that - perhaps within the first week or two.

The benefits of postnatal exercise

Some of the many benefits of postnatal exercise include:

- Speedier healing and recovery from the rigours of the birthing process
- Faster return to your pre-pregnancy shape and level of fitness
- Increased energy to cope with the demands of new motherhood
- Reduced stress and depression.

Your post-birth shape

If you are a first-time mother, you may be shocked at how your body looks after giving birth. Your pregnant belly was full, round and taut - but now it looks like a deflated beach ball, with no muscle tone at all. This is completely normal, so don't panic. Over the next few weeks, your uterus (womb) will contract and help to flatten your tummy. Postnatal exercise can further help your tummy return to its pre-pregnancy shape, but be patient - this normally takes a few months.

Take time to recover first

Childbirth places tremendous strain on the body, even if the labour and delivery were relatively straightforward and free of complications. Suggestions include:

- Don't feel pressured to exercise before you are ready. **Listen to your body.** For the first week or so, resting and bonding with your baby are more important than pulling on your running shoes.
- Pregnancy splits your abdominal muscles down the middle. It is important to make sure your muscles have healed before you begin any vigorous abdominal workouts. To check, lie on your back with one hand on your abdomen. Breathe out, lift your head and shoulders off the floor, and clench your tummy. Feel for any gap in your abdominal muscles. If you are unsure, consult with your doctor.
- Keep in mind that your ligaments and joints will be softened for at least three months following the birth, so avoid any high impact exercises or sports that require rapid direction changes. Vigorous stretching should be avoided too.

Exercise after caesarean birth

Caesarean delivery involves delivering the baby through a surgical incision in the abdominal wall and uterus. This incision is stitched closed. Be guided by your doctor but general suggestions include:

- To reduce the risk of blood clots, you will be asked by hospital staff to perform particular post-operative leg movements and breathing exercises. Follow all these instructions carefully.
- Once you are home, follow all self-care recommendations given by your doctor.
- Generally speaking, any exercise at all should be strictly avoided for at least the first three days.
- You will need to avoid heavy lifting for around six weeks.
- Regular aerobic exercise may not be an option for some weeks - it may be best to wait until you've had your six-week check-up.

Breastfeeding and weight loss

It's not true that all new mothers lose weight from breastfeeding alone. In fact, some mothers actually put on weight while breastfeeding. Research is scanty, but it seems that the women who are most likely to lose body fat from breastfeeding alone are younger rather than older, and didn't put on more than the recommended weight gain during pregnancy. The best advice is to rely on regular exercise and a sensible diet to lose weight, rather than expect that breastfeeding will trim the kilos for you.

Creating time for exercise

Unless your baby does little else but sleep, you may be hard pressed to find both the time and energy for regular exercise. Suggestions include:

- Don't be too hard on yourself if your exercise plans go awry. Just do the best you can, and remember - you will get more time to yourself as your baby settles into a predictable routine.
- Tummy and pelvic floor exercises can be done while you're doing other tasks, either sitting or standing. To help you remember, try performing the exercises whenever you do certain things, such as breastfeeding or driving the car. (For details on tummy and pelvic floor exercises, refer to the Better Health Channel article 'Postnatal exercise - sample workout').
- Walk your baby in the pram rather than use the car for short trips.
- Consider building up a home library of exercise videotapes. It might be a good idea to include a few tapes that offer shorter workouts too (such as 15 or 30 minutes), just so you don't have to always find a full hour or more to exercise.
- Whenever anyone offers help, such as babysitting, take it. You can use this time to exercise (unless you need sleep more than anything else).
- A sensible, low kilojoule diet can help you shed any excess kilos. See your doctor, dietitian or midwife for advice and guidance.

General exercise safety suggestions

Be guided by your doctor or midwife, but general suggestions include:

- Wear an appropriate bra that offers good support.
- Don't do any exercises that hurt your breasts.
- Try to exercise after breastfeeding, rather than before when your breasts are full and heavy.
- Aim to exercise three or four days per week.
- If you feel breathless or light-headed while exercising, slow down or stop.
- Avoid any activities that place stress on the unstable pelvic floor or your hip joints until joint strength and stability has improved. Be careful with activities that require sudden changes in direction (for example, high-impact aerobics, running and contact sports). This varies depending on the type of pregnancy and delivery you may have had.
- If you experience any changes in your postnatal vaginal flow (lochia), such as increased heaviness or changes in colour, see your doctor or midwife. You may be exercising too strenuously.
- Don't expect too much too soon. Many women experience difficulties in losing weight in the post-partum period. Allow yourself a reasonable length of time, such as a year, to get back into pre-pregnancy shape.

Types of exercise

Recommended postnatal exercise includes:

- Brisk walking
- Swimming
- Aquarobics
- Yoga
- Pilates
- Low impact aerobic workouts
- Light weight training
- Cycling.

See your doctor or midwife for further recommendations and cautions.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your midwife
- Physiotherapist
- 'Go for your life' Infoline service Tel. 1300 73 98 99

Things to remember

- Always consult with your doctor or midwife before starting any postnatal exercise program.
- It's not true that all new mothers lose weight from breastfeeding alone.
- Don't be too hard on yourself if your exercise plans go awry - you'll get more time to yourself as your baby settles into a predictable routine.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Kinect Australia (inc VICFIT in Victoria)

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