

## Returning safely to exercise

Hi, I'm Jess, pre/post natal qualified Move it Mama PT! Also mum of two; a nearly two year old and a nearly 12 week old! As a business, Move it Mama is so excited to share our musings with you, via Plunket, on various topics we hope you'll find useful.

I promise I'm usually much more light hearted and even a little funny than my first article might suggest (lol)... but I wanted to keep this informative with my main goal to leave you feeling confident in your return to exercise post-baby.

This is a topic we're probably asked about every week. So many women are misinformed on how to safely return to exercise after having a baby and question where to start. There is so *much* information accessible to us, both conflicting and confusing, that as a result women lack the confidence to know what to do or where to begin.

There has also been a considerable amount of pressure - societal, as well as from marketing and social media - placed on women to "bounce back" or "get their body back". Let us point out that there is in fact no "body" to "get back". Only that there is a body that needs to heal and should be treated with patience, love and care, as it recovers from a pretty monumental physical (and mental) task!

Additionally, every woman is different. Not only are we all genetically different with different health and exercise histories, we also experience different pregnancies, labours, births and recoveries. While there is no one size fits all approach to returning to exercise after having a baby, we do believe there are steps that can be taken to ensure a return to exercise in the safest possible way.

### Where to begin

There's a bit of a blanket rule thrown around and that is, that six weeks after birth, you can start exercising. The issue is that it's just that - a blanket rule - and while potentially suitable to one woman, it mightn't apply to another.

It's for this reason that our advice is to check with your qualified health professional(s) about when they think the right time for you to get back into exercise is. This could be your Midwife, Ob/Gyn or GP, but in some cases, your Midwife/Ob/Gyn/GP mightn't be experienced or equipped in giving you the comprehensive assessment you require. This is where the role of a Women's Health Physio comes in. Having a thorough assessment with a Women's Health Physio will put you in the most empowered position; knowing exactly where your body stands in terms of what exercise is safe to do and what, if any, rehabilitation is required post-birth. This should be your first step.

### But why is this so important?

Our bodies experience so much change throughout pregnancy and in the postpartum period. Even if feeling strong and motivated, there are many factors that should be taken into account before resuming your normal exercise regime.

Among these considerations are hormonal changes, cardiovascular changes, respiratory changes, musculoskeletal changes, and metabolic and thermoregulatory changes. There are also postural changes, as the centre of gravity shifts through pregnancy, as well as the significant pressure placed on the joints, pelvic floor and abdominal muscles. Postnatally, the body will continue experiencing or readjusting from these changes, which should be considered.

The hormone Relaxin, released into the bloodstream during pregnancy, helps prepare the body for birth by relaxing the ligaments of the pelvis and softening and widening the cervix. Post birth, Relaxin continues to be released into the bloodstream, which can mean women are more susceptible to injury (especially when compounded with broken sleep). It's important when getting back into exercise to start gently, as to reduce the risk of injury. The pelvic floor muscles, which fundamentally help to stabilise and support the spine, also control the pressure in your abdomen, support the bladder, bowel, vagina and uterus and impact sexual sensation and function. Pregnancy and birth (as well as other factors) can significantly weaken this group of muscles. It's subsequently really important that in the first instance post-birth, the focus is on rehabilitating the pelvic floor (regardless of whether a vaginal or c-section delivery). Far too many women go on to accept leaking/incontinence and/or prolapse as their long term fate, but this doesn't have to be the case. Many of these issues can go undiagnosed or unnoticed, so visiting a Women's Health Physio is a great way to ensure you're fully informed.

Diastasis recti (the separation of the rectus abdominis muscle) is also commonly experienced with pregnancy. Throughout a pregnancy, the abdominal muscles separate, and women are sometimes left with a gap as a result of the abdominal wall having stretched to accommodate the growing baby. We advise having someone check for a diastasis, whether a Midwife or a Women's Health Physio. Depending on the severity of a diastasis, some exercises will need modifying or even avoiding, and extra rehabilitation exercises might also be required.

For us, exercise is such a powerful tool in making us feel strong, confident and accomplished. With that and the above in mind, being assessed by someone qualified in doing so puts you in the best possible position when resuming exercise after a baby.

### **So what exercise should I do?**

All women should commence pelvic floor exercises as soon as possible post-birth (and preferably pre-birth, too). Although not necessary, a Women's Health Physio can assist with this and can prescribe you an individualised pelvic floor programme, and also check to make sure you're performing the exercises correctly.

We also advise that in the early stages (when ready), light core activation and breathing exercises are established to allow you to reconnect to your core, as well as reconnect your core and pelvic floor. The focus here is on reconnecting to your deep core muscles (transverse abdominals), and encouraging your body to get the core and pelvic floor working together. Doing these exercises will help in progressing to more vigorous activity (in time), as you rebuild your core and overall strength.

Subject to no contraindications to exercise otherwise, we then advise adding in gentle, low impact and functional exercise (once medically cleared). As we remind our members, there's *no rush*. Although it may feel difficult and hard as you begin exercising again, remember it will get easier. You might be tempted to jump in where you left off or where you were pre-pregnancy - slow down! Pregnancy and the postpartum period is not a time to smash aspirational fitness goals. There is simply no point in going gung ho only to cause damage or end up injured. Instead, enjoy the lighter pace and intensity and take it one day at a time. In most cases there will be modifications or regressions to exercise as you rebuild strength. For example a lot of bodyweight upper body and core exercises can be performed using an incline (a bench, couch, table, etc.). In bringing the 'ground' closer to you, less pressure is placed on the abdominals and the pelvic floor. If getting back to your gym and lifting weights, try starting off with just bodyweight or lighter/scaled back weights. Walking is also amazing; a

low impact, low intensity option to start with but that can also be made more strenuous later on (think hills, pace, etc.). If you prefer to run, we advise spending a good period rebuilding strength before pounding the pavement (everyone will differ on how long they need). Throughout this phase, be mindful of your breath and posture, as this is also likely to have changed during pregnancy. Often the activities of a new mother aren't all too conducive to 'fixing' postural changes, so including exercises that help counterbalance this is worthwhile.

#### **“Listen to your body” - is this enough?**

In short, no. We like this notion but also kind of don't, because it doesn't feel thorough enough. Listen to your body, but multiply that by about 10. A lot of exercise post-baby will take some 'feeling out'. You may need to test the water and go about some exercise in a trial and error manner, as you learn what feels good and what doesn't. An example of this would be with running or jumping; it might feel okay during - or it might not at all! - or you might experience discomfort or pain afterwards. You'll quickly learn and figure out whether an exercise or workout is too much. Try to avoid being disheartened; the next time you attempt that workout or that exercise, things may be different.

#### **Timeframe**

Some women will progress from completing just pelvic floor and breathing exercises for a few weeks postpartum, to including low impact functional exercises at about 6-10 weeks, and then by ~12 weeks or so, be able to lift their intensity. Others may not be anywhere near this timeframe, and instead may follow a completely different pathway back to exercise. All women are different; it takes time. Tune into your body over this period and just remember - it's nobody else's postpartum but yours. At Move it Mama, we believe simple is best; try not to over complicate it. Exercise is easily the most underutilised antidepressant and is so powerful in benefiting both our physical and mental health. Be kind to yourself and move your body. If in doubt, always seek guidance from a professional.