

Return To Exercise After Birth

Barwon Health Physiotherapy Department

Regular physical exercise has many benefits for mental and physical wellbeing. Due to the changes a woman's body undergoes during pregnancy and childbirth, it is necessary to allow time for recovery then gradually build up an exercise program.

This factsheet provides general guidance for returning to exercise after childbirth. Every woman's experience is different. It is therefore important to listen to your body, allow adequate time to heal and build up activity gradually.

The symptoms listed below may indicate that your body needs more time for recovery:

- Leaking from your bladder or bowel
- Heaviness, dragging, and/or aching in the perineal area (the area between your vagina and back passage)
- Pelvic or lower back pain



If you experience any of these during exercise, you can:

- Reduce the volume, intensity and / or type of exercise you are doing to the point where you are no longer experiencing symptoms
- Strengthen your pelvic floor muscles by doing specific exercises
- See a pelvic health physiotherapist or your GP for individual guidance

0-6 WEEKS POST BIRTH:

- Focus on rest and recovery to allow your body time to heal
- When you feel ready, begin short (5-10 minute), gentle walks
- Walking can help reduce general aches and pains
- Being outdoors can help your mental health
- Gradually increase the time then speed of your walks
- A Pelvic Floor Muscle (PFM) exercise program can be commenced as soon as you feel ready. If you have a urinary catheter, wait until this has been removed
- PFM exercises should be completed by all women (both vaginal and caesarean deliveries)
- Refer to the [Barwon Health website](#) to learn more (Pelvic Floor Muscles)

6-12 WEEKS POST BIRTH:

Readiness to engage in other forms of exercise will vary from woman to woman. It will be influenced by a variety of factors including:

- Pre-birth fitness
- Type of birth
- Recovery and strength of your PFM
- Fatigue levels
- The amount of sleep you are getting

For all exercise follow the principles of:

- Start gently and progress gradually
- Keep breathing during exercises (no breath holding)
- Activate your PFM (as discussed above)
- Continue to monitor for the symptoms listed on page 1 which may indicate that your body needs more time for recovery



Suggested exercise options for 6-12 weeks post birth:

- Walking - continue to increase time and speed. Aim to build up to a pace where you are slightly short of breath whilst walking. Aim for a minimum of 30 minutes continuous walking.
- Postnatal Yoga
- Postnatal Pilates
- Swimming - once lochia (after birth bleeding) has ceased
- Bike riding - if comfortable sitting on a bike seat
- Cross-trainer
- Body weight exercises building up to light weights (no heavier than your baby) e.g. squats, lunges, step ups, bridges. Increase number of repetitions before weights

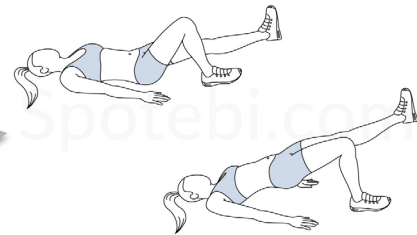


3-6 MONTHS POST BIRTH AND BEYOND:

If you wish to progress to a higher impact exercise program, continue to follow the principles of gradual progression and monitoring for symptoms.

The exercises listed below can be incorporated gradually to help prepare your body for higher impact exercise involving jumping/ jogging/ running:

- walk briskly for 30 minutes
- single leg balance for 10 seconds
- single leg squat 10 times each side
- single leg calf raise 20 times each leg
- single leg bridge 20 times each leg
- single leg sit to stand 20 times each leg
- jog on the spot for 1 minute
- hop on the spot for 10 times each leg
- forward bounds 10 times each side



www.spotebi.com

If any of these exercises provoke the symptoms listed on page 1 please continue with lower impact exercise for a while longer and seek individual advice.

If you have no symptoms with these exercises, you may begin to incorporate some higher impact exercise such as jumping/ jogging/ running.

Before trying exercises such as sit ups, curl ups, planks, hovers and mountain climbers, ensure you have good pelvic floor muscle function.

OTHER RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Choose exercise you enjoy, as you are more likely to do it regularly.
- Continue with low impact exercise until you are within the healthy weight range.
 - A higher BMI can increase the pressure on your PFM, especially during exercise
- Continue to monitor for symptoms that may indicate that your body needs more time for recovery and adjust your program accordingly
- You may feel more tired in the first few months due to interrupted sleep, the extra demands of motherhood and breastfeeding
 - Fatigue and over exertion during exercise can increase the risk of injury, so it is important to listen to your body and not overdo it
- If breastfeeding, wear a fitted supportive sports bra when exercising
- Moderate to vigorous exercise will *not* affect breast milk supply or quality
- Wear supportive footwear – shoe size can alter permanently with pregnancy, so check whether your footwear still fits

OTHER RESOURCES:

- For more detailed information on returning to running please refer to Return To Running Guidelines:
<https://mailchi.mp/38feb9423b2d/returning-to-running-postnatal-guideline>
- For further information on returning to exercise post birth and pelvic floor safe exercises post birth please refer to Pelvic Floor First website: <https://www.pelvicfloorfirst.org.au/>
- For further information on Pelvic Floor Muscle exercises – see Barwon Health Maternity Services Fact Sheets:
<https://www.barwonhealth.org.au/maternity-services/fact-sheets/postnatal>

WHERE TO SEEK HELP:

- Speak with your midwife or GP to obtain a referral to Barwon Health Pelvic Health Physiotherapy
- Search for a private Women's Health Physiotherapist using the following link:
<https://www.cfaphysio.com.au>
- Contact Barwon Health Allied Health Reception on Ph (03) 4215 0826



WISE
REVIEWED
JULY
2022

Return To Exercise After Birth, Physiotherapy Department, UHG