

Exercise for Postnatal Rehabilitation

Why rehabilitate the body after having a baby?

Targeted postnatal rehabilitation programs present the opportunity to reverse the deconditioning caused by pregnancy (1). Appropriate exercise prescription can restore stability and strength, as well as prevent weakness in the pelvic floor, abdominal wall and pelvis later in life (2). Benefits of appropriate postnatal exercise are (1,3,4):

- Improved core and lumbopelvic strength and stability
- Improved trunk mobility and flexibility
- Reduction in upper-back, lower-back and pelvic pain
- Improved posture
- Reduction in diastasis recti (abdominal separation)
- Reduction in maternal physical discomforts
- Increased cardiovascular fitness
- Increased energy
- Reduction in tiredness and fatigue
- Improved pelvic floor strength and function
- Reduction in urinary incontinence
- Improved wellbeing, self-esteem and body image
- Reduction in depression symptoms

Postnatal exercise considerations

The body has undergone nine months of physical and physiological changes and these do not reverse overnight. Typically, these changes persist for four to six weeks following delivery; however some adaptations can last for up to six months (3). Incorrect exercises can aggravate and exasperate postpartum symptoms and discomforts, potentially leaving new mothers with unnecessary pain and dysfunction (2). Self-monitoring of the exercise intensity and fatigue levels is recommended. Adequate hydration and calorie consumption is important, particularly if breastfeeding. A supportive bra to stabilize the breasts is recommended and nurse prior to exercise to avoid engorgement discomfort.

Exercise prescription

Medical clearance should precede initiation of exercise and it may range from 24 hours to 8 weeks after delivery. Readiness to return to exercise is dependent upon a number of factors including health status, fitness, age and the pregnancy, labour and delivery experience (3). Exercise resumption needs to be slow with a gradual progression. It should be tailored to the individual and their physical and emotional requirements. Aim for relaxation and invigoration, rather than exercise that causes stress and fatigue.

Specific rehabilitative exercises can be performed from 24 hours following a natural vaginal birth with no complications. Mild exercise can be resumed within 1-2 weeks following a natural vaginal delivery and 6-8 weeks after a Caesarean section (3). Rebuild and restore core and pelvic stability for a solid foundation. Include both aerobic and anaerobic exercises and incorporate strength training (2). Target all muscle groups and body parts. Be patient with fitness progress, as many women (including athletes) do not return to pre-pregnancy fitness levels for 1-2 years (1).

Exercises to include	Exercises to avoid in the initial stages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • TVA re-engagement, activation and strengthening • Pelvic floor exercises • Trunk stabilization exercises • Pelvic Stabilization exercises • Pelvic strength and flexibility exercises • Postural strengthening, particularly upper and lower back • Slowly resume aerobic exercise • Include strength exercises • All major muscle groups targeted 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exercises that cause a bearing down on their pelvic floor • Traditional abdominal exercises such as a crunch or plank • High impact exercises and jumping • Fast or lateral movements • Changes of direction movements • Extremes of joint flexion/extension • All activities that cause discomfort or heavy lochia bleeding

References and further information

Exercise is Medicine Australia www.exerciseismedicine.org.au

Find an Accredited Exercise Physiologist www.essa.org.au

Exercise Right www.exerciseright.com.au

1. Kawaguchi, J.K. (2010). The pregnant athlete, part 3: Exercise in the postpartum period and return to play. *Athletic Therapy Today*, 15 (4), 36-41.
2. Swanson, S. (2001). Abdominal muscles in pregnancy and the postpartum period. *International Journal of Childbirth Education*, 16(4), 12-14.
3. Larson-Meyer D.E. (2003). The effects of regular postpartum exercise on mother and child. *International SportMed Journal*, 4(6), 1-14.
4. Dinc, A., Beji, N.K, Yalcin, O. (2009). Effect of pelvic floor muscle exercises in the treatment of urinary incontinence during pregnancy and the postpartum period. *International Urogynecology Journal*, 20, 1223-1231.

For more detailed information, please read the full version of this factsheet at www.exerciseismedicine.org.au

