

LOOKING AFTER NUMBER ONE

There's a wealth of information available about how to look after your baby, but what about looking after yourself? Here, we look at exercise after birth and find out how to do it safely and effectively...

With a newborn baby to care for, many women forget about looking after themselves. In fact, the results of NCT's recent postnatal care survey showed that women often feel more attention is paid to the well-being of their babies than to them. It's no surprise that, after the excitement of the pregnancy, many women end up feeling flabby and negative about their bodies after the birth.

Helen Stanborough, mum to 18-month old Thea and member of NCT Woking branch, agrees: 'My new postnatal squashy body was a bit alien to me. I thought I would never look the same again. It felt like a jumper that had been stretched beyond belief!'

It's little wonder that many new mums are keen to start exercising – perhaps even more so because of celebrities such as Dannii Minogue and Angelina Jolie who appear stick thin weeks after giving birth.

But, there seems to be a lack of accurate information on exercises that are safe and effective for postnatal women. The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) published guidelines in the summer called *Dietary interventions and physical activity interventions for*

weight management before, during and after pregnancy. They stated that, during their six- to eight-week postnatal check, women should be given clear, tailored, consistent, up-to-date and timely advice about how to lose weight safely after childbirth. NCT welcomes the guidelines but knows that, for many women, the reality is very different.

Anna Coe, a mum to four children who works with mother and baby exercise groups Pushy Mothers, and Mumsinshape, says: 'Sadly there is a huge amount of poor at best, and dangerous at worst, information for mums. I have a client who was given a sheet of exercises by her health visitor that included sit-ups, which can be damaging. There's a gap in healthcare provision for postnatal mums and this makes it a minefield for women.'

Plus, the postnatal exercise industry isn't regulated, so effectively anyone can set up a postnatal exercise course. That's why women need to exercise caution, literally.

Understanding your body

Anna says she understands some women are desperate to return to their pre-pregnancy exercise regime. 'But patience

Fitting in fitness:
BuggyFit and
Mumsinshape
both offer
mother and baby
exercise classes.





Photo courtesy of MumsInShape

Some women are desperate to return to their pre-pregnancy exercise regime. But patience pays dividends



Photo courtesy of BuggyFit

pays dividends,' she says. It is not a good idea to try to do too much, too soon.

The pelvis and pelvic floor are the main areas at risk from damage. 'Baby has been resting on these muscles for nine months,' explains Judy DiFiore, director of Pushy Mothers and author of *The Complete Guide to Postnatal Fitness*. 'Any activity that increases pressure on the pelvic floor is inappropriate – high impact aerobics, running, weight training and even some pilates exercises.' She is also adamant that sit-ups should be avoided while the deep abdominal and pelvic floor muscles are still weak. Increased pressure on the weakened pelvic floor could lead to pelvic organ prolapse and incontinence in subsequent pregnancies or later in life.

Joints all over the body are also vulnerable. This is because during pregnancy the body produces a hormone called relaxin. In the simplest terms, this relaxes the joints in your pelvis and all over the body, ready for labour. 'Reduced ligamentous support is experienced by most women and this increases the risk of joint injury if exercise is commenced too soon or inappropriate activities are selected,' says Judy.

Avoiding strenuous exercises is also key because, during pregnancy, your tummy muscles separate to accommodate the bump. While Judy says these superficial tummy muscles will come back together for most women by six weeks post birth, there will still be a weakness in the whole abdominal group so there is an injury risk.

Before 6-8 week postnatal check

Although women need to be careful about doing too much, too soon, there are still gentle exercises they can do, at least up until their six- to eight-week postnatal check with their GP. Pelvic floor exercises can be started as soon after the birth as the woman feels able. Strolling with the buggy is also a good, gentle exercise. Walking tall with good posture will help to activate the deep abdominal and pelvic floor muscles.

Helen was a big fan of walking in the weeks after Thea's birth. 'It was easy to do as I could put Thea in a buggy and march off – childcare was not a worry and I didn't have to pay a thing. I would also meet up with friends and we'd walk for ages, taking food and a flask and making a day of it.'

Judy is keen to stress that mums should not try anything more brisk. 'Fitness professionals are not qualified to decide if a new mum has recovered sufficiently to

YOUR SAY

Exercise tales and tips

'The more you exercise the fitter you will become. Let's not forget the positive effects on the kids. My children see the enjoyment I get from exercise and love it too.'
Helen Maguire, Power Pramming
www.powerpramming.co.uk

'The days on which mums don't feel like going out are the days they need to come to a mum and baby class. They'll be with other mums who understand.'
Sarah Allen, BuggyFit, and NCT antenatal teacher
www.buggyfit.co.uk

'Don't expect to be doing your old exercise regime within weeks of giving birth. Encourage friends to join you. If it becomes an enjoyable, social fixture you are more likely to stick to it.'
Louise Whyte, Penelope Fitstar
www.penelopefitstar.com

'Ask about your instructor's qualifications. In 10 years of teaching, I have only ever been asked about my training once. This shows women are completely trusting.'
Anna Coe, Pushy Mothers and Mumsinshape
www.pushymothers.com
www.mumsinshape.co.uk

NCT Shop sells DVDs to help you exercise at home:
www.nctshop.co.uk
Try Pilates for Mums with Lindsey Jackson or Davina McCall: My Pre and Post Natal Workouts.

Or you can buy the Miracle Box for Mums and Mums to Be:
www.nctshop.co.uk
It contains an anti-burst exercise ball and pump, exercise posters and a DVD about regaining pelvic floor strength.

Photo courtesy of Pushy Mothers



exercise - this is why the onus is on the mum to get the all-clear from the GP. However, it is worth pointing out that the content of the GP check varies considerably, as does their advice regarding exercise.'

After 6-8 week postnatal check

Mums can gradually step up their exercise regime after they get the go-ahead from their GP in the postnatal check. Those who have had a caesarean birth will need to wait longer. The general rule is that gentle exercise can begin 10-12 weeks after the birth, again subject to postnatal checks.

There are exercise classes specifically for postnatal women - with the bonus of meeting other mums, building support networks and motivating each other.

It's advisable to find a qualified instructor registered with the Guild of Pregnancy & Postnatal Instructors. But it's still worth trusting your instincts on how far to push yourself because lack of regulation means there are no guarantees the instructor will be giving the most up-to-date advice.

If you're unable to find a postnatal class near you, you could try a regular low-impact class, but tell the instructor you've had a baby. And be cautious - especially if the instructor does not have a postnatal qualification.

Family friendly exercise

Many mums feel exercising is impossible because they don't want to be separated from their baby, or they can't find, or afford, childcare. But there are family-friendly ways of exercising, including mum and baby exercise groups, such as BuggyFit, Pushy Mothers and Mumsinshape. Sessions can cost between £4 and £8, depending on your area and whether you pay as you go or block book sessions.

Helen found that family days involving exercise were a good solution. 'We often went swimming - my husband would take Thea in the kids' pool and I would sneak off and get a few lengths in.' Plus, while it's easy to think we need a gym to exercise, Helen took advantage of Thea's naps to try pilates at home. There are also lots of postnatal exercise DVDs available - but don't push yourself if it feels uncomfortable.

Getting down to it

However you choose to exercise, there are practicalities to consider. It is advisable to have a good, supportive sports bra that is fitted to you postnatally. Reports in the past have suggested that exercise affects women's milk production, but this has since been disproved. For comfort, mums may want to feed their baby before exercising as it will reduce the size of the breasts and lessen the chance of leaks. If you are breastfeeding, drink fluids before, during, and after, exercise to avoid dehydration.

Many of the same pre-pregnancy advice applies to postnatal exercise - avoid exercising on an empty stomach, wear appropriate footwear and warm up beforehand. Also, ensure the level of exercise is comfortable and recognise when your body has had enough. Stop if you experience pain or fatigue.

While there is disagreement over when and how to exercise postnatally, one thing is for sure - exercise is good for you. The endorphins help lift the mood and it can increase self-esteem. Plus it can be a sociable experience. Exercise no longer has to be a solitary slog!

For qualified instructors who are registered with the Guild of Pregnancy & Postnatal Instructors, visit www.postnatalexercise.co.uk.