

## Physiotherapy Postnatal Exercise Advice

### Returning to High Intensity Exercise in the Postnatal Period

Start the following exercise guidelines only after you feel ready to progress from the exercises on the immediate postnatal handout and the postnatal exercise progression handout.

If you are having any pelvic floor symptoms seek medical review or consult your physiotherapist before commencing any high intensity exercise after your baby is born.

#### **BE AWARE:**

After pregnancy the hormone relaxin can stay in your body up to 4-6 months postnatally, leaving your ligaments and pelvic floor muscles more vulnerable to injury in the postnatal period. You will have reduced core stability and mechanical control as your abdominal muscles have naturally stretched during pregnancy and require time and care to recover, particularly following a caesarean section. For these reasons it is important to progress your exercise intensity slowly and to always wear appropriate and supportive clothing and footwear. There is also the risk of incontinence/prolapse if you resume strenuous exercise too soon after your baby has been born and your pelvic floor muscles haven't fully recovered

#### **Returning to running/high intensity exercise in the postnatal period:**

**Phase 1: Healing and Recovery Time:** The body has undergone significant changes for the last 9-10 months and is healing from the delivery of your baby. No two pregnancies and no two births are the same and it is important in this phase to understand that. Physically, the focus should be on: getting as much sleep and rest as possible, balancing gentle movement with pain management and ensuring you have a well-balanced diet. You should follow the gentle exercise advice as per the postnatal exercise handout at this stage.

**Phase 2: Return to Movement:** Once you feel comfortable carrying out your daily activities you can start phase 2. You will need to start specific core exercises strengthening the core and pelvic floor muscles to prepare your body for the impact of running in later phases. Follow the exercises on the postnatal exercise progression handout for ideas about strengthening these muscles or on the examples at the end of this leaflet. We recommend low impact exercises for the first 3 months or longer if you have pelvic floor issues.

**Phase 3: The Walk/Run Phase:** When you have completed a program of core and pelvic floor strengthening, you may start a walk to run program. It is important to continue core and pelvic floor exercises during and after this phase. Firstly, you should test your pelvic floor and core strength by brisk walking and following this you can start intervals of walking and light jogging. If any leaking or feeling of heaviness occurs or your abdomen still has a noticeable gap, this is a sign that you should return back to phase 2 exercises. If you have no symptoms, build up your exercise intensity slowly and take days in between as needed to allow for recovery. A "couch to 5K" running programme can be helpful as an introduction back into running.

**The 2019 Returning to running postnatal guidelines** recommend that you should be able to achieve the following exercises without pain, heaviness, dragging or incontinence before starting running.

Walking 30 minutes

- Single leg balance 10 seconds
- Single leg squat 10 repetitions each side
- Jog on the spot 1 minute
- Forward bounds 10 repetitions
- Hop in place 10 repetitions each leg
- Single leg 'running man': opposite arm and hip flexion/extension (bent knee) 10 repetitions each side

Strength training includes, aiming for 20 of each exercise

- Standing on one leg and raising up and down
- Single leg bridge
- Single leg sit to stand
- Side lying lifting upper leg to hip level

**Phase 4: Return to Running:** This final phase describes the return to consistent, pain free and regular running up to 5km. You should continue dynamic core exercises and may commence light plyometrics such as running drills or light jumping to continue to challenge the pelvic floor.

**Phase 5: Looking Forward and Competitive Sport:** At this point your core and pelvic floor must be well strengthened and you can consider the return to your usual running distance and sports regime. You should consider waiting a week or two to let body adapt to new levels of exercise intensity before adding in hills or longer distances. Be aware that reaching this stage can take several months.

#### **Other forms of exercise:**

Always listen to your body and understand that you may not be ready to return to running. If eager to run you can try jogging or running in a swimming pool which puts less strain on your pelvic floor while still providing a good level of resistance. You can also try other low impact activities that are safer choices including seated cycling, postnatal or beginner pilates, yoga and low impact aerobic or postnatal exercise classes.

#### **If you are Breastfeeding:**

Based on current research, if you are breastfeeding, you may prefer to nurse before exercise or collect pre-exercise milk for later consumption as enlarged breasts may cause discomfort during high impact activities. You may benefit from wearing a personally fitted **sports bra** that offers support rather than compression. Keep hydrated.

If you do experience any leakage from your bladder or bowel, contact the **physiotherapy department** to make an individual appointment on **01 8171787**. You can self-refer up to 6 months after your baby is born.

Have a look at our **pelvic floor and postnatal exercise videos** on [www.rotunda.ie](http://www.rotunda.ie) also if you have any queries.

