



Fact sheet Returning to sport or exercise after the birth

Women may incorrectly believe their sport and other high impact exercise is taking care of their pelvic floor muscles. Participating in sport, running or other high impact activities during pregnancy and early after childbirth may actually reduce pelvic floor muscle strength and cause long-term bladder and bowel problems or pelvic organ prolapse. When all care and precautions are taken you can minimise the risk of these developing.

How does returning to sport or exercise too soon after the birth affect my pelvic floor muscles?

Have you heard of the 'Boat Theory'? This is one way to help you think about the role of the pelvic floor muscles in supporting your pelvic organs.

Imagine that your pelvic floor is the water level, while your pelvic organs (your uterus, bladder and bowel) are the boat sitting on top of the water. The 'boat' is attached by ropes (your supportive ligaments) to the jetty. Now if the 'water level' (ie. your pelvic floor muscles) is normal, there is no tension on the ropes.

After pregnancy and the birth of your baby, your pelvic floor muscles can be stretched, so the 'water level' is lower. Imagine if the 'water level' stayed low for years. If your pelvic floor muscles do not strengthen up again, by you doing your exercises, then there is much more tension on the 'ropes' or your supportive ligaments. If this continues, then the ligaments can overstretch and weaken, and there is more risk of you developing a prolapse. This may occur soon after the birth, or in the years to come. Refer to the fact sheet *What is a prolapse?* for more information.

If your pelvic floor muscles strengthen back up again, then there will be no ongoing tension on the ligaments supporting your pelvic organs, and therefore less risk of developing a prolapse in the future.

Imagine however what would happen if you added jumping, running or bouncing type of activities to a pelvic floor that was still stretched. This could further weaken your muscles and place extra tension on the supporting ligaments so they are more likely to become overstretched and weakened. This can result in your pelvic organs dropping down, as there is less support for them from above and below, and a prolapse occurring.

So you may feel fine on the outside, but be unable to see what is occurring on the inside. This is why some women may not notice a prolapse occurring until they return again to exercise, unaware that there is the risk of this happening. This is what happened to Jondelle (not her real name). Read her story, and compare the difference with her experiences after her first and second babies.

Jondelle's story (used with permission)

After the birth of her first baby, Jondelle returned to A-grade sport after only five weeks. Jondelle had no problems day to day with her pelvic floor muscles or bladder control. Although she always went to the toilet before a game, she experienced a small amount of urine leakage while playing, and felt damp in her underwear after a game so she needed to wear pads while she played. Then she developed a bulging down below, and found out that the front wall of her vagina, which supports the bladder, had dropped down. This is called a bladder prolapse.

Jondelle went to see the physiotherapist when her baby was eight months old, who advised her that because her pelvic floor muscles were still weak, she should consider stop playing sport to allow them to recover from the birth. In addition when Jondelle coughed, her pelvic floor dropped considerably, and the bladder prolapse increased. This indicates that any time any downwards pressure occurred on her pelvic floor muscles, then this could be happening. This may occur during a cough, sneeze, while lifting her baby or anything heavier than her baby, while pushing a full shopping trolley and certainly with any bouncing or running type of activities.

Jondelle's pelvic floor exercise program included working the muscles together with a cough, to aim to reduce the

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amount of every day pressure on the pelvic floor muscles, otherwise the prolapse would just continue to worsen over time. This took a lot of concentration, and she needed to work with the physiotherapist to learn to do this correctly.

Jondelle also needed to work on her pelvic floor muscles with exercises to strengthen them. She had not done her exercises regularly during her pregnancy, not realising that the weakening of the muscles would affect her this way after the birth. Even when she returned to try sport again after her baby was 15 months old, she still experienced some leakage and felt heavy after the game in the pelvic floor area. The effects of early return to sport can sometimes be long lasting. Jondelle needed to put a lot of work into getting her pelvic floor muscles strong again. The prolapse reduced as she did her exercises and she took care with her daily and sporting activities.

During Jondelle's second pregnancy she did her pelvic floor muscle exercises diligently. She went back to the gym after three weeks, but did not return to sport or running. She had been focusing on using her pelvic floor muscles during the day, and also on bracing her abdominal muscles. This time she experienced no urine leakage and had not noticed a bulge in the vaginal area.

When her second baby was seven months old, Jondelle saw her physiotherapist for another check. Her pelvic floor muscles were still continuing to improve, and there was only a small drop of her vaginal wall when she did cough. This was much less severe than after her previous pregnancy.

Being far more aware this time around, and taking more care of her pelvic floor muscles during pregnancy, means that Jondelle didn't experience the urine leakage and prolapse like she did after her first pregnancy. Although she needed to find an alternative form of exercise (ie. working out at the gym instead of playing sport) straight away, she was glad that she made this decision. She will now have a stronger pelvic floor for years to come, after taking the time to work her pelvic floor before and after the birth.

Can exercising too soon after the birth cause back pain?

After the birth of your baby, no matter how fit or toned you are, it takes a minimum of eight weeks before your stomach muscles are toned enough to support your lower back and pelvis. This means that if you go back too soon to running, sport or higher impact exercise then there is a



lot more movement in your lower back than there should be. There is no way that your abdominal muscles can go from being really stretched during pregnancy (think of how long they are at the end of your pregnancy), to being shortened and firm enough to provide good support for your back and pelvis.

If you watch people walking or running, you will notice that some people's backs don't move a lot at all, whereas in others their back and pelvis really wobbles from side to side. This can be the case in those first few months after the birth, where your spine is not as stable as it usually is. If you add impact or running type of activities to this, then there is a lot more strain going through your spine and pelvis than there should be. Combine this with the effects of the hormone relaxin affecting the ligaments in your body for up to 3–4 months after the birth, and there is more chance that could injure your back.

Post natal abdominal muscle bracing and steady progression of abdominal and pelvic floor muscle exercises are important, to improve the strength and tone in your lower abdominal muscles. This will then give support to your lower back and pelvis while you exercise. See the fact sheet *Pregnancy and post natal abdominal muscle bracing*.

When you return to sport, even if you do wait until 3–4 months, if you find that your lower back is still not strong or if back ache or pain occurs, you may need to drop back your level of intensity or involvement. You will need to focus further on your postnatal abdominal muscle exercises. When you have a new baby to look after, your back also needs to be strong, both now and for the future. You are doing more activities which can potentially place strain on your back, so your back is more vulnerable. For this added reason, continue to work on your postnatal abdominal muscle exercises even if you do not plan to go back to higher impact exercise right now or at all.

When you consider that waiting a few more weeks or months could save you from having problems in the future, it is worth the wait.

To get the correct advice it is important that the health or fitness professional that you ask has an interest and experience in postnatal exercise.

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Returning to sport – how to do it right!

It is important to remember that no matter how fit you are on the outside, it is your pelvic floor and back that you are trying to protect. By going back to sport or exercise before these areas have recovered back to normal after the birth, you can cause problems to develop either now or later in life. These could include prolapse, leakage of urine or back pain.

It is normal for women who really enjoy exercise to want to get back into it soon after the birth. This is a good thing. Exercise brings many benefits, and also provides the opportunity for some time for yourself while someone else looks after your baby, which can be a welcome break. Women also want to exercise as they may feel flabby and not toned. But it is important to consider what type of exercise you do initially, and how quickly you go back to higher impact exercise, sport and running.

Seek professional advice to help you make the right decisions about your exercise choices. Also consider alternatives if you enjoy running, such as water running with a buoyancy belt. This can be hard work pushing against the water, and can be done with no impact on your pelvic floor or lower back. Other low impact activities which are safer choices include swimming (after your bleeding stops), walking, cycling and low impact aerobic or post natal exercise classes.

You can return to your previous activity levels after 16 weeks, providing that your pelvic floor muscles are back to normal. If you are pregnant and reading this, now is the time to test and record your 'normal' pelvic floor fitness, so you have a 'normal' to aim for after the birth.

If you do feel any vaginal heaviness, urine loss or back pain during or after exercise, you should slow down or reduce your intensity level, and wait a bit longer. You should also seek further advice or treatment from a continence and women's health physiotherapist if any problems persist.

Other factors to consider

Often women can be tired in the first months after having a baby. This can be due to interrupted sleep, the extra demands of motherhood and also breastfeeding. You also need to consider that if you are fatigued and push yourself too much during exercise, that there is more chance of an injury occurring. It is important to listen to your body and how you are feeling. Be aware of any 'warning signs' of pain or discomfort and take care, slowing down if necessary to let them subside, rather than pushing through at this time.

While you are learning to breastfeed (if you are breastfeeding) and looking after your baby, you may not have the desire to exercise in the first few weeks or months. During this time you can still be strengthening your abdominal and pelvic floor muscles in preparation for when you do feel ready to return to exercise. You may still find that walking is an exercise that will get you out of the house, and one that you can do with your baby and maybe your partner or a friend.

For information of postnatal abdominal muscle bracing exercises speak to a continence and women's health physiotherapist or fitness instructor with post natal experience.

For further information:

- The Australian Physiotherapy Association on (03) 9092 0888
- www.thepregnancycentre.com
- The National Continence Helpline on (free call) 1800 33 00 66 or www.continence.org.au

