

CRUNCHES and KIDS

PRIORITIZING
WOMEN'S FITNESS
AFTER PREGNANCY

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Do you ever think to yourself, *What happened to my body and fitness after having babies?* Before pregnancy I was so fit, I could run, jump, lift things and play sports without having to worry about injuries, but since having kids I have no time to exercise between them and getting back to work. Did you try to get back to fitness and think: *Whose body is this? Is your body moving in an entirely different way?* Do you wonder: *Where do I even start?*

If this sounds familiar, you're not alone. Many women struggle with their health, strength and exercise after pregnancy. This trend emerges from a combination of the physiological changes that occur during and after pregnancy, and the dramatic time demands of children throughout their early lives.

As children become more independent, many moms find themselves with slightly more time, but have great difficulty returning to exercise at levels they did previously due to the loss of strength (better known as deconditioning) that occurs in the years prior.

The good news? It doesn't have to be this way! You can take control of your health and fitness. In this article we are going to talk about the gradual loss of strength facing women of child-bearing years, and some do's and don'ts for your road back to physical health and keeping up with your little ones.

Deconditioning is a progressive loss of strength and mobility that is associated with less physical activity. We like to think about it on a graph. When you're in your 20s, or prior to having kids, there are times when you feel pretty darn invincible. Want to train for a marathon? Sure. Start doing CrossFit? Absolutely! Take up aerial yoga on weekends for fun? You bet!

Your tissue is strong, robust, and resilient — aches and pains, begone! Then, this funny thing happens. You get pregnant, and people start telling you to be careful — maybe some of those things you did pre-pregnancy aren't as safe anymore, so you stop doing them. (Note: Many fitness practices are safe, even during pregnancy. But before starting any fitness regimen, discuss it with your doctor to ensure it's the best course of action for you.)

All of a sudden — even though you don't have pain — that tissue gets a little weaker because it's not getting regular use. Then your little bundle of joy arrives, and even though she's cute, she keeps you up all night. So whenever she sleeps, you sleep; you don't have time to exercise! In the meantime, that

tissue continues its gradual decrease in resilience. The longer you wait to resume exercise, the further this decline goes.

Fast forward two kids and 10 years, when they start to get more independent. Now, even though you've remained largely injury-free over the last decade, you're a victim of insidious deconditioning, or a chronic lack of exercise. So when you start to exercise again, it's like meeting a whole new woman.

Rest assured: insidious deconditioning doesn't mean you're fragile, it doesn't mean you're broken, and it certainly doesn't mean you've "just gotten old." All it means is you need strengthening — and the sooner you start, the better!

YOUR CHILD'S TIMELINE AND YOURS

We know building strength before and after pregnancy is incredibly important, and we also know it's a marathon, not a sprint! Below, we look at some normal timelines you can expect after you welcome the smallest member into your family.

First six weeks: Rest, rest and more rest. Wouldn't it be amazing for our bodies if we just nourished them with sleep, good nutrition, proper hydration and gentle movement? This is your time to heal, to establish the baby's feeding, and to give yourself permission to listen to your body and its need to rest. We recommend doing just the above. And if you're keen to do more, add some breathing exercises and get used to lifting five to 10 pounds throughout the day to establish your new baseline.

First six months: Your body is still adapting and adjusting to postpartum hormones and changes. Proper nutrition, hydration and gradual progression toward movement and loading (also known as strengthening) are key. This is where many moms get lost in the fear of what to do, what not to do, and doing too much too soon. After six weeks is a good timeline to be assessed by a pelvic health physiotherapist and move toward strengthening in various positions as your baby continues to grow, and your baseline lifting, holding and carrying strength builds.

One year and beyond: You've built up the endurance to carry around a toddler all day, and can push a loaded stroller around the block to the park for an outing. Now is the time most really consider getting back into a physical fitness routine and don't know where to start.



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Here are some do's and don'ts to help guide you on your way.

THE DO'S OF POSTPARTUM STRENGTH

DO use physiotherapy to start your rehab process.

Previous Grey-Bruce Kids articles have explored the role of physiotherapy in pelvic floor rehabilitation, and we can't emphasize this enough. Pelvic rehabilitation can start right away, and we encourage any woman with children (grown, growing, or coming soon) to work with a qualified pelvic health physiotherapist.

DO embrace the new normal.

This is perhaps the most important piece of advice we can give you. You're a mom — you're already a superhero! But that doesn't mean you can lift cars up over your head yet (Hot Wheels, yes. Hondas, no). A big part of successfully reintroducing fitness is accepting and embracing what you're capable of, even if it's a far cry from where you used to be. Remember everything else your beautiful body has accomplished in that time (see: children). Just because you weren't lifting

weights doesn't mean you weren't working. This is where you're at. Embrace it, and grow.

DO take small steps to return.

While jumping in with both feet can feel like the best way to drop baby weight and beat your mummy tummy, it usually results in injuries and increases the likelihood that you'll quit exercising altogether. Instead, aim for a measured, gradual increase in exercise while checking in with yourself to see if you're doing too much, too soon.

DO find a physiotherapist or professional to work with.

Yes, we already said go to a PT, but sometimes we forget that PTs do a lot more than just the immediate pelvic floor rehab. We work with moms well past the initial stage to get them doing yoga, or lifting weights (yes — that stage looks a heck of a lot more like working out!). If you have a personal trainer you've worked with before, and if they have knowledge related to postpartum care, stick with them. If not, seek out a professional who does.

DO make a commitment to yourself (and stick to it!).

Even if it's just exercising once a week to start. Find a group to do it with, or pencil it in your schedule as a "can't miss" appointment. Your health matters for the sake of your family, and active parents are more likely to have active kids by setting good examples of healthy living.

THE DON'TS OF POSTPARTUM STRENGTH

DON'T think you have to do this on your own.

There are so many options when it comes to community groups and classes — baby boot camps, baby-and-mom yoga, play groups at the park. Many recreational centres and gyms offer daycare services to watch your little ones while you exercise. Plan walking groups at the park or sign up for baby swim lessons together.

DON'T think you're the only one going through this.

It's easy to look at moms on Instagram and say, "Why can't I just do what she's doing?" It's also easy to buy into the lie that you're far behind other moms. In reality, you're no different than the vast majority of moms who are struggling with their health after having kids.

DON'T ignore what your body is telling you.

Your body is a brilliant, beautiful piece of biology. It is strong, and it is resilient. But when your body is saying, 'Stop,' or your

spidey senses are saying what you're doing may not be working for you, get the help of someone who has the knowledge and experience you need.

Notice we didn't say anything about not lifting heavy things, or to avoid jumping or running entirely? Your body is strong, resilient and tough. With the right progressions, you should be able to lift, jump and run, chase kids and play tag, lug groceries, hockey bags and sleeping kids out of awkward car seats.

You don't have to wait for an injury to tell you that you need to get stronger or reclaim your health through exercise, and you certainly don't have to wait until after pregnancy to do this, either. There are a multitude of options for women before and during pregnancy. The best defence is a solid offence. Work with a trained professional to get a new baseline of mobility and strength, and work on a program that's built for you — the mom — with attention to what moms need.

Every single mom, in some way, shape or form, will deal with the post-partum complications that come with kids, be that pelvic floor and core related, or just simply not having the time to spend on yourself. You're not alone! **GBK**

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