

RETURNING TO *exercise* AFTER BIRTH

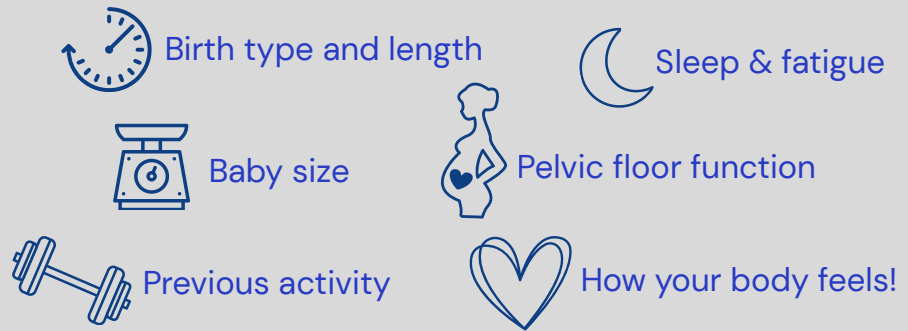
A GUIDE TO SAFE AND GRADUAL RECOVERY

Important note:

Everyone's postpartum journey is different. This post will outline the latest evidence to provide guidance on where to get started, but it is important to:

- ♥ Listen to your body
- ♥ Be guided by your symptoms
- ♥ Focus on rest and recovery
- ♥ Avoid comparison

JUST SOME FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE YOUR POSTPARTUM JOURNEY:



Returning to exercise is a gradual process of rebuilding strength, confidence and comfort, not a race to "bounce back". The best recovery plan is one that is guided by your symptoms, your goals and how your body responds.

1

WHY MOVEMENT & REST MATTER AFTER BIRTH

Pregnancy and birth place significant demands on your muscles, joints, pelvic floor and core, and recovery takes time. The first few weeks after birth are about giving your body the time and support it needs to heal while gradually rebuilding strength and confidence.



MOVEMENT SUPPORTS:



Improving circulation and reducing stiffness



Rebuilding strength and confidence



Supporting your mood, energy and mental wellbeing



Helping you gradually return to everyday activities



WHAT MOVEMENT CAN LOOK LIKE:

Short walks

Gentle stretching or mobility

Deep breathing

Everyday activities around the home

REST IS JUST AS IMPORTANT

Rest is an equally essential part of recovery. Rest will help:



Support tissue healing



Reduce fatigue



Improve recovery



Prepare your body for increasing activity

WHAT REST CAN LOOK LIKE:

Prioritise sleep where possible

Reading and downtime

Enjoying time with your baby

Putting off unessential tasks

Did you know?

Research shows there is no single timeline for returning to exercise after birth. Every birth and every body is different. While timelines can provide a helpful starting point, how you feel during and after movement is much more important than the number of weeks since birth. **Your body is your best guide.** If symptoms increase, it may be a sign to slow down, modify your exercise or seek support.



2 WHERE DO I START?

Getting started after birth doesn't mean jumping back into your previous exercise routine. Recovery happens in stages, and each stage helps prepare your body for the next.

1) Support recovery

BIRTH – 8+ WEEKS

- Gentle movement
- Short walks
- Breathing and relaxation
- Everyday activities
- Rest and recovery
- Pelvic floor awareness*

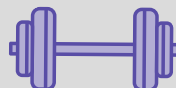
* Gently lift around the vagina and anus as you breathe, then fully relax.



2) Build your foundation

6 – 16+ WEEKS

- Gentle, progressive strength exercises including a focus on core, pelvic floor, and lower limbs (i.e. gentle body weight Pilates)
- Increasing exercise duration
- Low-impact cardio
- Gradual loading



3) Rebuild tolerance for impact

12 – 26+ WEEKS

- Impact examples: HIIT, running, jumping, heavy strength work.
- Start small (i.e. walk, jog intervals) and gradually increase impact, intensity & volume as your body allows.
- Wait 3 months post birth before commencing higher impact loads to allow for adequate recovery



 Timelines are just a guide. A safe return is about listening to your body and rebuilding gradually. Your muscles, joints, pelvic floor, and cardiovascular system all need time to restore capacity after birth



3 HOW DO I KNOW IF I'M READY?

Progression isn't based on reaching a certain week postpartum. Instead, pay attention to how your body responds to movement. Feeling comfortable during exercise and recovering well afterwards are often the best signs you're ready to gradually do more.

1) Support recovery

BIRTH – 8+ WEEKS

Readiness to progress:

- ✓ Movement feels comfortable
- ✓ Symptoms are improving, not worsening
- ✓ Everyday tasks feel easier
- ✓ Your energy and confidence with movement are building



2) Build your foundation

6 – 16+ WEEKS

Readiness to progress:

- ✓ Comfortable with daily activities
- ✓ You can exercise gently without increased pain or pelvic floor symptoms
- ✓ You've built a foundation of strength
- ✓ You recover well after activity
- ✓ You feel ready to introduce more structured exercise



3) Rebuild tolerance for impact

12 – 26+ WEEKS

Signs you're tolerating well:

- ✓ You can increase exercise without symptoms developing
- ✓ You recover well between sessions
- ✓ No ongoing pain, pelvic heaviness or leakage
- ✓ Strength & confidence improving
- ✓ Your body feels capable of handling increased demands



4 WHAT MIGHT A GRADUAL RETURN LOOK LIKE?

Example only, not a target or deadline. Start later, remain at a stage longer or step back as needed.

WEEKS 1-4

PRIORITISE HEALING

Rest and spend time horizontally

Short walks around the home

Gentle breathing and pelvic floor awareness*

***More is not more:** 5-8 gentle lifts of the anus/vagina with complete relaxation between, done 2-3 x a day is plenty. Start in lying and slowly progress to sitting / standing positions. This should be gentle and painfree.



WEEKS 2-6

GENTLE INTRODUCTION OF MORE MOVEMENT

Start with 5-10 minute walks

Gradually build to 15-20 mins

Balance activity with rest

Increase time or distance before pace



WEEKS 6-12+

ADD STRENGTH

1-2 x per week

Example exercises:



1-2 sets of 6-10 reps

Build gradually

WEEKS 12+

ADD IMPACT

1-2 x per week on top of strength work

Start small and progress as tolerated. Example:

- 5 min walk
- Jog 30 sec, walk 30 sec x 5
- 5 min walk

Slowly ↑ jog & ↓ walk



Increase one thing at a time: distance, time, load or intensity

If symptoms increase, step back or seek help with one of our physiotherapists

FAQS: ANSWERED

Should I book a post-partum appointment ahead of time?

It doesn't hurt to be proactive, especially if you have experienced some concerns during pregnancy. However, not everyone requires a check following birth.

I had a caesarean. Does this advice still apply?

Yes, the same principles of rest, gentle movement & progression apply. But abdominal healing, pain and wound recovery may affect your pace. Seek support if symptoms persist or recovery feels complicated.

I exercised regularly before pregnancy. Can I progress quicker?

Previous fitness may help, but it does not remove the need for tissue healing after pregnancy and birth. Cardiovascular fitness can also return faster than pelvic floor, abdominal and musculoskeletal load tolerance. Let symptoms, strength and recovery (not previous fitness alone) guide progression.

What happens at a pelvic health physio appointment?

Your physio will discuss your birth, symptoms and goals, then assess relevant movement, strength and pelvic floor function. With your consent, this may include an internal vaginal exam to help guide an individual treatment plan.

5

WHEN SHOULD I GET SUPPORT?

Getting support is a step forward, not a step back. Not everyone needs pelvic health clearance before returning to exercise. Consider booking if symptoms persist, recovery feels complicated, or you're unsure how to progress safely.



Pelvic Floor Symptoms

- Leaking urine, stool or wind
- Urgency or trouble emptying
- Pelvic pressure, dragging or heaviness
- Reduced bowel control

These may be a sign of pelvic floor dysfunction or prolapse.



Symptoms with movement

- Pelvic, perineal or abdominal pain
- Pain with sex or vaginal insertion
- Difficulty activating or relaxing your pelvic floor
- Symptoms worsening with exercise

Early support can make a big difference to comfort and long-term recovery.



Delayed or complex healing

- Assisted (forceps or vacuum) or caesarean birth
- Significant tearing or ongoing pain
- Wound or birth complications
- Traumatic birth

These experiences can affect healing and individual support can help you recover with confidence.



Seek urgent medical care if you experience:

Chest pain or difficulty breathing

Fainting, seizures, severe headache or dizziness

Fever or signs of infection

Heavy bleeding or severe abdominal pain

One-sided calf pain or swelling

Thoughts of harming yourself or your baby

You don't have to navigate recovery alone.

Kara and Cheryl, our dedicated pelvic health physiotherapists can assess your symptoms, discuss your goals and help create a plan that feels right for you. Book online or call our friendly reception team on **(03) 5442 4044.**