

# POST BABY FACT SHEET

- ✓ Getting back in shape
- ✓ What to know before you start
- ✓ When to start exercising after birth? How often? How intensely?
- ✓ Which exercises you should do and not do
- ✓ Abdominal separation
- ✓ Why your pelvic floor is so important
- ✓ Progressing successfully back to your pre-baby body





# INTRODUCTION

Congratulations! You've had your baby and after being pregnant for nine months you're now anxious to get back to your normal workout routine and get back into shape.

That's great because regular exercise post birth has many benefits. Not only is it good for your physical recovery, but also for your mental health and overall wellbeing. In fact, it may help reduce the risk of post-natal depression. The good news is that with some guidance, getting your body back after having a baby is not as hard as you might think.

Importantly though, every pregnancy, every delivery and every "body" is different. So, before you do anything, work closely with your doctor to make sure everything is safe before engaging in any workout program after giving birth.

**At Active8me we appreciate all of this, which is why our experts have written this starter guide to help you. When you sign up to our post-baby program there's a more in-depth resource provided.**





## **SETTING** some expectations and getting real

Celebrities seem to get back into shape within weeks and make it look so easy, don't they? Well let's start with getting real. Firstly, many of those celebrities have a personal chef, a nanny and an on-call personal trainer. So not only is it not as effortless as it might appear, the reality is that most people don't have that level of support. Secondly, you must never forget that your body has been through a life changing experience.

Remember, your shape changed gradually over nine months as you made room for your precious cargo. Now post-baby there are a lot of life changes too. You experience a gamut of new emotions, have less time, a lack of sleep and you're not as mobile as you were before... to name a few.

So, first things first... please cut yourself some slack and adjust your expectations. It took you nine months to create the perfect environment for your baby to grow in, so getting your pre-baby body back won't happen overnight and may take just as long.



# WHAT to know before you start

## 1. Make sure you've got clearance from your doctor before starting any exercise program.

Ideally this will happen at your six-week postnatal check-up but if you feel ready to get started a little earlier, talk to your doctor to seek advice. Likewise, if you need to wait a little longer to get started (which is often the case after a c-section), that's fine too. There's no rush.

## 2. Understand your body has changed for birth

Although the changes in your body function and shape are most notable 4-6 weeks after birth, your muscles, tendons and joints do not return to their pre-pregnancy state for 9-12 months. Your muscles are weaker, and your ligaments and joints are more pliable. So be sensible, don't expect too much, and take precautions when exercising as it's easier to injure yourself by stretching or twisting too much.

### **3. Check for separated abdominals**

Abdominal separation (diastasis) is very common post pregnancy. Before starting any exercise program, use the guide below to check for this and consult your doctor. If you believe you have diastasis, it's important you do rehabilitative exercises, before moving on to a broader fitness regime.

### **5. Do pelvic floor and core exercises**

Pregnancy and labour can stretch and weaken your pelvic floor. So, doing pelvic floor and core exercises is important for all mother's post birth. However, they will continue to be important for keeping your pelvic floor strong throughout the rest of your life. They're especially important though if you have abdominal separation. Active8me's post-baby programs are written with this in mind. Just like building a house, strengthening your pelvic floor and core will set strong foundations. This allows you to steadily move from low-impact exercises to higher intensity and high impact exercises. All of our post- baby programs are designed to get you back into shape safely and healthily!

### **6. Take extra precautions after a Caesarian birth (c-section)**

Take extra precautions when starting an exercise program after a c-section. If you feel any pain or excessive pulling from your scar, reduce the intensity of your exercise.

### **7. Buy a new bra**

Buy a new, maternity designed sports bra before you start. Trust us – your pre-pregnancy sports bra will not cut it!





## **WHEN** can I begin exercising after delivery?

Your doctor or health care professional will guide you on how soon you can begin your exercise routine after delivering your baby.

Once you have approval from your doctor, most women can safely perform a low impact activity one to two weeks after a vaginal birth (typically three to four weeks after a caesarean birth). This would include light walking, daily stretches and some core/pelvic (kegel) floor exercises.



## HOW TO CHECK for separated abdominals (diastasis) before you start

Abdominal separation or 'diastasis recti' is a fairly common condition. The pressure of the uterus pushing against the abdominal wall in conjunction with hormone softened connective tissue causes the left and right parts of your ab's to spread apart. If the connective tissue doesn't regain its elasticity post partem, you are left with separated abs.



## A simple self-test for abdominal separation

Check out [this video](#) for a simple self-test.

Signs of abdominal separation include:

- ✓ A gap of more than 2<sup>1/2</sup> finger-widths (or 2cm) when the rectus abdominis is fully contracted.
- ✓ The gap does not shrink as you contract your abdominal wall.
- ✓ You can see a small mound protruding along the length of your midline.

## An important note

A midline where the tissue remains wide and results in a midline gap of more than 2 to 2.5 finger-widths, or 2cm, is considered problematic. If this is the case you should consult your doctor or health care professional if this is the case.

Additionally, if at any time you see a round, hard, or painful bulge protruding from your belly button area, or along your mid line, you should consult your doctor or health care professional.





# PELVIC FLOOR and its importance

It is important to remember that it's not just the muscles that you can see that need to be strengthened. A strong pelvic floor, back and pelvis are especially important after giving birth.

## What is my pelvic floor?

The pelvic floor is a broad sling of muscles, ligaments and sheet-like tissues that stretch from your pubic bone at the front of your body, to the base of your spine at the back. Think of your pelvic floor as being similar to a trampoline, as it can stretch when something presses down on it and bounce back up again. Unlike a trampoline, however, if it bears weight for a long time, as it does in pregnancy, the muscles and tissues can become overstretched and weak.

## How will birth have affected my pelvic floor?

Just being pregnant can weaken your pelvic floor but labour especially can stretch and weaken your pelvic floor as it stretches to allow your baby's head to pass out of your womb, and through your vagina. This is especially so if you had a big baby, a long labour, had a severe tear or had a forceps delivery.

## Why do I need a strong pelvic floor?

Your pelvic floor is important because it supports your uterus (womb), bladder and bowel. Having a weakened pelvic floor makes it harder for you to squeeze the muscles and sphincters at the bottom of your bladder. As a result, you may find that you accidentally leak a little urine when you cough, sneeze or exercise (up to a third of all new mums can be affected by this situation which is referred to as stress incontinence). Your pelvic floor affects your vaginal muscles, too. If you have a weak pelvic floor you may find sex less satisfying and feel less sensitivity in your vagina.

Working on your postnatal abdominal muscle exercises to strengthen your pelvic floor is also helpful because it aids you in strengthening your back. Having a strong back is important when you have a new baby to care for because you are likely to be doing more activities that can potentially place strain on your back. In any event, you'll need to keep your pelvic floor strong for the rest of your life, as hormonal changes after menopause can make pelvic floor problems (e.g. bladder weakness, prolapse symptoms) more likely too.

## How do I find my pelvic floor muscles?

There are a number of ways to find your pelvic floor muscles. Try to stop your urine mid flow or stop wind from your back passage. These are your pelvic floor muscles. NB: You will notice the different feeling and 'deeper' nature of these pelvic floor muscles than the rectus abdominal muscles which we often keep tight during different fitness exercises.





# PELVIC FLOOR AND CORE EXERCISES for all new mums

Don't despair if your tummy is soft and floppy after your baby is born as all the abdominal muscles have been stretched to their limits. Be assured your tummy will strengthen and shrink back with commitment to the right exercises.

The key to successful strengthening is to use the correct technique to engage your deep abdominals (pelvic floor) and then progressively challenge the deep abdominal muscles with exercises that further promote and restore core control and abdominal muscle recovery.

Active8me's post-baby programs are written with all this in mind.

## Example exercise 1

- ✓ Start by lying on your side
- ✓ Activate your lower abdominal wall by gently drawing inwards the area beneath your briefs. Think of a jellyfish – drawing up (as opposed to clenching). As if you are trying to stop your urine mid-flow or stop passing wind
- ✓ Maintain this abdominal activation for 5 to 10 seconds
- ✓ Breathe normally throughout
- ✓ Relax your abdominal wall back to resting

NB: Your upper abdomen should remain relaxed throughout this exercise



## HOW OFTEN should I exercise?

There is no rule here. This will depend on your fitness before your baby was born, your birth experience, your time availability, the amount of sleep you're getting, the extra demands of motherhood and breastfeeding, the support you have, your recovery, how you're feeling and so on.

**Active8me's programs are designed so you are exercising regularly throughout the week, but still have a day or two off for rest. These are part of the plan, but it is important to remember that you are in control.**

**The important thing is to listen to your body and how you are feeling.** Fatigue and over exertion during exercise can increase the risk of injury. Slow down and skip a workout if you need to (e.g. when you are down with a cold or just too tired). Be aware of any warning signs of pain or discomfort and slow down if necessary, rather than pushing through the pain.

Healthy, active living and sensible exercising for your physical and mental health is the goal. Remember, above all, your baby needs a healthy mum so don't burden yourself with unrealistic expectations or timeframes around getting your pre-baby body back.



# WHICH EXERCISES should I do or not do?

When it comes to getting your pre-baby body back, you need to take it week by week. In this way, it is less about which specific exercises you should or shouldn't do and more about gradually building on specific stages and progressing into tougher and more varied exercises. Like building a house, each stage is foundational for the next.

## Safe Exercises

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- ✓ Walking / treadmill / hiking
- ✓ Cycling / spinning
- ✓ Pilates
- ✓ Yoga / stretching
- ✓ Water aerobics
- ✓ Weight training / circuits
- ✓ Swimming (assuming no bleeding)

## Exercises to avoid

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- Especially for women with abdominal separation, avoid all activities that place stress on the midline – activities that stretch or overly expand the abdominal wall. Examples might include:
- X Movements where the upper body twists and the arm on that side extends away from the body, such as 'triangle pose'
  - X Exercises that require lying backward over a large exercise ball
  - X Yoga postures that stretch the abs, such as 'cow pose', 'up-dog', all backbends, and 'belly breathing'
  - X Avoid intense core abdominal exercises
  - X Abdominal exercises that flex the upper spine off the floor or against the force of gravity such as: ab crunches, oblique curls, 'bicycles', sit-up roll ups/roll downs, etc.
  - X Pilates mat and reformer exercises that utilize the 'head float' position, upper body flexion, or double leg extension
  - X Lifting and carrying very heavy objects
  - X Heavily loaded resistance exercises
  - X Intense exercise without abdominal support
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# HOW INTENSELY should I exercise?

The key guide to how hard you should workout is your rate of perceived exertion (RPE) as opposed to any specific heart rate.

RPE or the Borg Scale is a scale that determines how hard you are working, based on how you feel when you are exercising. With so many changes and demands going on in your body during this time (e.g. breastfeeding), it is a better way of measuring and estimating exercise intensity than the old way of using heart rates. RPE is not affected by changing heart-rates during pregnancy or post birth stages. It depends on your individual fitness level and will be influenced by your birth recovery.

There is no clearly defined upper limit of 'safe RPE' for exercise post baby.

In general it is recommended that you:

- ✓ Remain in the low part of the scale ('low intensity') in the first 4 weeks
- ✓ Then low to moderate in the next four weeks (weeks 4-8)
- ✓ Then aim to steadily and safely increase back to higher impact exercise and a higher RPE over the following 3-4 month period

As a benchmark, a good way to determine a comfortable moderate intensity while exercising is through the talk test. You should be able to **talk and maintain a conversation during exercise whilst breathing comfortably**. If you are coughing, gasping, getting out of breath and uncomfortable then you need to slow down.

## WARNING SIGNS to stop exercising

Stop exercising immediately and consult your doctor or health care provider for advice if you:

- X Experience increased fatigue
- X Experience any unusual pain
- X Feel faint, dizzy, nauseated or light-headed
- X Have vaginal bleeding more than normal
- X There are colour changes to lochia (post-partum vaginal flow) to pink or red
- X Heavier lochia flow or lochia starts flowing again after it had stopped.
- X Have difficulty walking
- X Any heavy bleeding, excessive soreness, headaches or other unusual symptoms during or right after exercising.





# SUMMARY

## Staged exercise progression

Below are some summarised guidelines for you. The full guidelines are provided in your Active8me post baby program welcome pack. However, remember the following important points:

- ✓ Always consult your doctor or health practitioner before starting any exercise program.
- ✓ These are just guidelines and ideas. You need to listen to your body, consult your doctor, be sensible and exert yourself depending on how you are feeling.
- ✓ It is less about how long it takes to move from one stage to another and more about working at your own pace, getting back into shape in a controlled and sensible way, and enjoying the journey along the way.
- ✓ We highly recommend a structured and customised exercise program like Active8me's post-baby program. Our experts have written the program so you can progress from low intensity pelvic floor exercises, through to lower intensity movement, then to the sort of high-intensity workouts you may have been doing before you became pregnant. It is also combined with nutritious, healthy and delicious meal plans designed by our expert dietician, and mindset lessons designed to motivate and equip you throughout the program.

## 0-4 WEEKS

### *After pregnancy without any complication*

**At this stage your focus is on rest and recovery** and just getting used to moving your body again. Exercise is low impact so it doesn't stress the pelvic floor or joints. You are gradually building back into exercise and focusing on pelvic floor exercises. At this early stage, you will need every bit of energy you have for milk production and for your natural flow of hormones to cope with sleepless nights and night feeds.

## 4-8 WEEKS

### *After birth without any complication*

It is recommended that you wait until your postnatal check before moving to this stage. **Now you can incorporate 2 to 4 light workouts per week, keeping your intensity mainly low.** Think walk, swim or aqua aerobics. Including some light stability work, such as light weights from 6 weeks post-partum is acceptable.

## 8-12 WEEKS

### *After birth without any complication*

Now your body is remembering how to move with your core and back becoming more conditioned. You are starting to feel a little like your old self. So, **at this stage you are doing the same as weeks 4-8, but gradually increasing your intensity and weights.**

## 12-16 WEEKS

### *After birth without any complication*

At this stage you're starting to get back to your old fitness and agility so it is time to challenge yourself and really break out in a sweat. So, exercise can become higher intensity and more circuit based. You may wish to consider visiting a physiotherapist for a postnatal abdominal muscle check and pelvic floor muscle testing before returning to higher impact and high intensity exercise.



## 16 WEEKS ONWARDS

### *After birth without any complication*

**At this stage you're challenging yourself consistently in your workouts and should be back to your previous activity levels.** Now start mixing it up and incorporate a stability ball to increase your core strength (provided your pelvic floor muscles have returned to normal and you are not experiencing any back pain, vaginal heaviness, or urine loss during or after exercise).

Your baby is now a little older so you might like to include your baby into your exercise routine. It's fun and your baby loves it too. Here's some examples:

1. Stand, hold baby close to your chest and squat as though you are sitting down into a chair. Straighten and repeat.
2. Lie on your back - place baby on your lower legs, hold onto their body and lift baby slowly up and down with your legs.

*Active8me was created to help you become the person you want to be. Our purpose is to empower you to take control of your life, your future and to live a healthy, active life. Everything about Active8me is designed to help you succeed. From this Post Baby Fact Sheet to the all-in-one integrated app which contains our comprehensive Post Baby program – including:*

- *Workouts so you can exercise safely and effectively*
- *Meal plans, so you can eat healthily and nourish you and your baby*
- *Mindset lessons so you can feel motivated and empowered, and see real and lasting change*
- *The ability to track your progress – from energy, to activity, to calories, to sleep, to water, to before & after photos*
- *... and much more.*

*This Fact Sheet is just a taste. So, download our comprehensive 12 week Post Baby program in the Active8me app and join us on an incredible journey designed with you in mind.*

*You can do this.*

**Exercise. Nourish. Think. Transform.**

**active8me**