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Rehabilitation after childbirth

By Tyler Dyck

A common question many new mothers have for their doctor or physiotherapist is, how soon can they begin exercising after the birth of their new baby? Many new mothers are keen to get on a regular fitness program to shed some of the weight they may have put on during their pregnancy, but it is important to consult with a physician to ascertain if it is safe to return to an exercise routine. During the postpartum period the body is undergoing many changes and is recovering from the stresses of pregnancy, labor and delivery. In particular, a woman who has given birth to twins (or triplets and etc), was on bed rest, or had a difficult labor, may need to return to regular exercise even more carefully.

The American College of Gynecologists states, "pre-pregnancy exercise routines should be resumed gradually based on a woman's physical capability." Unfortunately this statement is rather general and can leave women uncertain of how and when to start.

In the first six to eight weeks postpartum, progressive walking is probably the best exercise as it is gentle on the body and can be started with just 10 minutes at a time. Initially, it is easier on the body to walk twice a day for 10 minutes than to walk 20 minutes all at once. Intensity should be mild to moderate so as not to over exert the body. A good rule of thumb is the "talk test" where one should easily be able to carry on a verbal conversation while walking.

Pregnancy and delivery can cause muscle imbalances in the diaphragm, pelvic floor, hip, abdomen and low back muscles. Without specific retraining, these imbalances and postural changes may become permanent. A 2004 study done in Norway demonstrated that specific stabilizing exercises were more effective in decreasing pelvic girdle pain than compared to a general exercise routine even one year postpartum .

The following problems can be related to postpartum muscle or joint dysfunction:

- Urinary incontinence (10-30% of women at some point in their lives) ³
- Separation of rectus abdominus, the "sit-up" muscles (note: this problem can be made worse by doing abdominal crunches)

- Low back or buttock pain (ligaments are not as stable for first 6-8 weeks due to hormones)
- Uterine/bladder prolapse (weakened support of pelvic organs)
- Neck/upper back pain (often due to repetitive lifting of baby and poor posture during breast/bottle feeding)

It is important to know that some mainstream gym exercises can actually do more harm than good during the postpartum period. Instead, you may wish to see a Women's Health physiotherapist, who is trained to perform a thorough assessment before prescribing appropriate treatment. Treatment could consist of hands-on techniques to correct joint/soft tissue imbalances, postural education, modalities for pain relief, and corrective exercises.

For further information on this topic please contact the Fawzia Sultan Rehabilitation Institute (FSRI) in Hawally at 264-2862, or check out our website at www.rehabinstitutekuwait.com

The author of this article, Tyler Dyck is the Executive Clinic Director of the FSRI and is a Fellow of the Canadian Academy of Manual and Manipulative Physiotherapists, a Sports Physiotherapy Specialist, and a Certified Intramuscular Stimulation Acupuncture Practitioner.