

Postnatal Recovery The Hardest Question to Answer

I have been working as a physiotherapist for quite a long time. Apart from people who come to physio without underwear on, there isn't much that surprises me. I can answer most questions or at least be pretty confident that I can find the answer....EXCEPT when I am asked things like:

“When do you think I will be better?”

Or when a pregnant lady asks me:

“How long before I will be back to normal?”

This is a tough one and sometimes I want to be flippant and just say, “You will never be normal again”.....

But I can see you already thinking “Oh come on, that’s the question that everyone wants to know. So let’s have a think about recovering from pregnancy and giving birth and try to answer those questions.

I will divide the body up into different sections to help give some understanding, but in reality all the areas have to work together.

Spinal Range of Movement

This is probably the easiest, but often most forgotten. When you are pregnant as your bump gets bigger it stops you from bending your back forward. How many pregnant ladies can touch their toes at the end of pregnancy? It is a great excuse to have your partner to do up your shoes. The bump also stops you twisting from your waist, hence the pregnancy waddle walk. In physio language this is flexion and rotation of the spine.

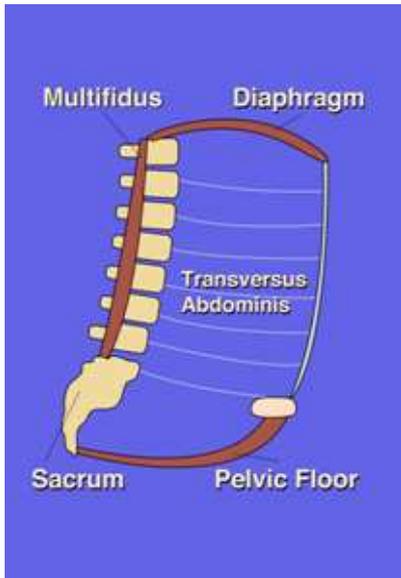
Here are a couple of pretty simple stretches to improve your spinal range of movement. Whilst you are doing these stretches take the opportunity to take some deep breaths, really letting the sides of your ribs expand and your tummy rise up as you breathe in, so that you are using your diaphragm. As you breathe out relax into the stretch. Below are two examples of curling stretches you can do and two rotation stretches.



Muscle strength

We all know that we have to get our tummy muscles strong after giving birth, but why and how is a little complicated.

The abdominal/ tummy muscles are made of three layers. Firstly, the core muscles - these are the pelvic floor and transverse abdominal.



The pelvic floor is important not just to support the bladder, but as you contract your pelvic floor the transverse abdominal contracts as well. This is a lower abdominal muscle that wraps around the tummy and the pelvis drawing the tummy in and helping to bring the pelvis together and support the lower back.

Try the exercise below.

Breathe in and lift the pelvic floor, breathe out and lift one foot off the floor bringing your knee up so it is 90°. Trying to keep your pelvic floor lifted throughout, lower the leg slowly down whilst breathing out.



When you can do the above exercise easily and without any strain to the back, try lifting the other leg slowly up to meet the first. Always try to breathe throughout and keep the pelvic floor lifted. Lower one leg down at a time, never both together. Pilates is based on this type of stability exercise, stabilising the pelvis and spine whilst being able to move the legs.

The second layer of muscles is the obliques. These muscles do not seem to be so difficult to strengthen and often are overused. They draw the waist in below the rib cage but not the tummy, if these muscles become overused then it can give you a pot belly appearance, not a nice flatter tummy.

Trying to work the core muscles not just the general tummy muscles is very important if you have a rectus diastases. This occurs in most pregnancies to differing degrees. This is where the main abdominal muscles that run from sternum (chest) to your pelvis separate.

The amount can vary from 1cm to 4cm. It is important to do exercise that helps to knit these muscles back together. Conventional sit-ups do not draw the tummy muscles back together in the same way, and you might even notice that as you do a sit-up your tummy bulges upwards. It is more important to work the pelvic floor and transverse abdominals which wrap around and bring the muscle back together.

Hormones

As you are aware your hormones change significantly when you are pregnant and when you are breast feeding. The main hormone that I want you to be aware of is relaxin. This is released when you are pregnant to soften the ligaments and allow the pelvis to stretch. It is not specific to the pelvis and all the ligaments of the body will stretch. Relaxin is still produced whilst breast feeding and can be found in the body up to nine months after giving birth even if you have stopped feeding. The problem is that the ligaments of the body will still be lax for all this time and therefore impact activity can be detrimental on the joints as they don't have the normal pre pregnancy support. This is made worse as generally during the inactive period of pregnancy the body loses a lot of muscle bulk so there is less strength to support the joints. My opinion is that for 6 months, whilst your hormones are changing, high impact activities such as running and step classes should be avoided as they may be more detrimental than beneficial.

Life

Let's start thinking about some specific healing times. Over the first 6-8 weeks following birth there is soft tissue healing of all your delicate bits. You can start pelvic floor exercises straight away. As soon as you feel comfortable try your pelvic floor exercise. This might feel very difficult, but you will slowly build up. Often a good time is when you are feeding the baby.

This early stage is a real adjustment phase where you are not only healing, but the hormones are changing and you are learning to cope with all the new things in life, from changing a nappy to how to feed.

Between 4-8 weeks most people feel ready to try some very gentle exercises. I would suggest you start with the gentle range of movement stretches. The stretches might make your movement immediately better, but to get a change in flexibility long term will take up to 3 months.

After you have had your GP post-natal check at 6-8 weeks you are usually ready to start strength work. Increasing muscle power takes - time a minimum of 3 months - before you notice changes. So be patient with yourself! Start with the basic core type exercises, as above. Don't be tempted to do lots of sit-ups. Sit-ups do work the abdominals but until the core muscle are strong sit-ups might cause the tummy to bulge up and the abdominal muscles to separate further. By 3-6 months the core muscles are starting to get stronger and you should be able to add more general abdominal exercises like sit ups or obliques.

Let us be realistic about life though. In the perfect world you would do your exercises daily and conscientiously. However with a baby life changes, time will disappear and you might find you only have time once a week. You will probably be sleep deprived and exercises won't be a priority.

Everyone is an individual. Some people's tissues will have stretched more than others. Individuals' muscles strengthen at different rates. Try not to compare yourself to your friends; just as your babies are totally different so are your bodies.

The last word is that it took nine months to get into this condition, in the perfect world it takes a minimum of nine months to recover, but for some people it only happens after three children and 10 years. It does not matter; as long as you aren't in pain and you are enjoying motherhood give yourself a break. If you are in pain see your GP, a simple individual assessment and exercise programme might be needed. Remember it is never too late to start so don't put pressure on yourself to achieve everything today. That is why "when can I start?" and "how long will it take?" are hard questions as it really depends on the individual, and the life they lead.