



# MOTHERS MOVING FORWARD

A postpartum guide to being physically active

by Corliss Bean, PhD and Iris Lesser, PhD



## ABOUT US

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We were physically active prior to the delivery of our children and navigated the adjustments and challenges of engaging in physical activity firsthand during the postpartum period.

Because of this, our research explores women's postpartum physical activity experiences with the goal of providing a better understanding around what's necessary to support and improve women's experiences during this transition. This guidebook is one way that we are putting our research into action to support the health and wellbeing of new mothers.

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Your body grew and sustained a human being, and those stretch marks on your belly are the well-earned badge of a warrior. It will take time to feel like yourself again, but...you will have a newfound appreciation for all your body has done...Motherhood will push your body to new limits, to new heights, to new possibilities....Every inch of you will be used to care for [your child], and though it's completely and utterly exhausting on most days, this superhero stamina is a miracle worth noticing.

**Ashley Gadd, author of *The Magic of Motherhood: The Good Stuff, the Hard Stuff, and Everything In Between***





**01**

# **GETTING STARTED**



# CONGRATULATIONS ON YOUR NEW BABY! NOW WHAT?

Congratulations! Giving birth to a child is an extraordinary life event. You and your body have gone through an amazing physical and emotional ordeal. Once you welcome your baby home, nothing is ever the same again. These next several months are so important for you to take care of both yourself and your little one.

## **The fourth trimester**

The first 3 months after childbirth is often referred to as the 'fourth trimester,' but no one really talks about it. Although your baby is no longer in your womb, they are highly dependent on you. And on top of that, you're navigating your own recovery. During these months, you will likely experience an overwhelming number of emotions. This transition can be physically and mentally demanding.<sup>1</sup> It's easy to focus on the new baby's needs and let your own needs fall to the wayside.

Remember, it's important to care for yourself and your infant. Engaging in physical activity is a great way to care for your body and your mind.

## **Healthy mom makes for healthy baby**

We recognize that there is a lot going on in your life during this period, and physical activity does not need to be the first thing you think about. However, it's important to consider how and when you can be physically active once you feel your body is ready. Mothers who engage in physical activity after recovery from birth tend to have better mental and physical health outcomes.<sup>2</sup> These outcomes may include improved mood as you negotiate the challenges of infant care, increased aerobic fitness that will allow you to be active with your child, and the creation of a socially supportive network with other mothers.<sup>3</sup>

## **What do we mean by physical activity?**

Physical activity can look different for everyone. For some women, getting through the tasks of infant care can be physically demanding on its own. For other women, especially those who were physically active throughout pregnancy and had an uncomplicated delivery, physical activity may be a return to structured exercise. Regardless of where you're starting from, the important thing is that you're moving your body! So, whether you are a beginner mover looking to start a physical activity routine, or an avid exerciser or athlete, we hope you will find this guidebook useful and informative.



A person wearing a bright red jacket and light-colored pants is seen from behind, pushing a black stroller on a paved path. A brown dog is walking on a leash next to the stroller. The path is surrounded by trees with autumn foliage in shades of yellow, orange, and brown. The sky is clear and blue. The scene is captured in bright daylight, with shadows cast on the path.

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A return to play protocol is desperately needed. We need guidance as our bodies change and adapt. My body doesn't feel the same as it did pre-pregnancy and it may never again, but I need to know I am not harming my body when engaging in physical activity.



# WHERE DO I START?



## What does being physically active look like?

The Society of Obstetricians and Gynecologists of Canada and Canadian Society of Exercise Physiology state that women should slowly return to physical activity after giving birth and work their way up to the general physical activity guidelines of 150 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous aerobic physical activity per week.<sup>4,5</sup>

**Is this enough to get you started?** Moms we spoke to didn't think so. We asked women about the questions they had around physical activity engagement in their first year postpartum.

- » How much physical activity should I do?
- » What intensity of physical activity is safe for me?
- » What type of physical activity should I engage in?
- » How do I engage in physical activity with my newborn?
- » How will I know if I've pushed my body too hard?

What most of these new mothers shared with us about their physical activity engagement during the first year of motherhood is in parallel with what has been identified in the literature: physical activity is reduced with the birth of a child and primary barriers to engagement include a lack of opportunity.<sup>3</sup> Women said they would benefit from strategies and recommendations to engage in physical activity after the birth of a child, including finding time, support, and motivation.

In this guidebook, we hope to answer some of these questions, and yours, about returning to physical activity after birth. For example, to meet the physical activity guidelines of 150 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous aerobic physical activity per week, you could go for three 10-minute walks each day in the early weeks post-birth.

Whether it's your first child or third, we want you to feel supported and connected on your postpartum journey. Throughout the guidebook, we have included quotes from the mothers we've interviewed in our research. We hope this helps you feel that you are not alone in your questions and concerns as you begin to move forward in your physical activity journey.



**02**

# **TAKING CARE OF YOUR POSTPARTUM SELF**

# PELVIC HEALTH



Most postpartum women can benefit from individualized assessment with a pelvic floor physiotherapist after birth.<sup>6</sup>

## Signs you should seek professional help include:

- » Urinary and or/fecal incontinence
- » Urinary and/or fecal urgency that is difficult to defer
- » Heaviness/pressure/bulge/drag in pelvic area
- » Pain with intercourse
- » Constipation resulting in problems with defecation
- » Separated abdominal muscles and/or decreased abdominal strength and function
- » Pain in pelvis and low back

The pelvic floor is a crucial group of muscles that helps maintain bladder and bowel control, support internal organs, and coordinate with the deep core, diaphragm, and deep back muscles. These muscles do a lot of the heavy lifting during pregnancy and can be strained during childbirth. It's important to assess the pelvic floor after childbirth to determine if and how much rehabilitation is required.

Early in the postpartum period, the key is to rest and restore. Give yourself grace and take time to work on the foundations: doing breathing exercises, prioritizing sleep, eating nutrient-rich foods, walking, and beginning to activate deep core, pelvic floor, and buttocks muscles. Returning to exercise should be progressive.

It's important to **listen to your body** and modify the task or load if you're experiencing any bladder or bowel leakage, pelvic pressure/heaviness, or pain with the exercise. Physical activity has many physical and mental benefits, but it's possible that training past your body's limits (for example, through pain or leakage) could further contribute to dysfunction down the road.

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“I think I went back to exercise too much too fast. I had some issues leaking, which isn't great. I ended up needing to go see [a professional] about it and had to back off my exercise.”

# HOW DO I ASSESS MY PELVIC FLOOR?

The gold standard is an individualized assessment by a pelvic floor physical therapist, including an internal vaginal and/or rectal exam. If this isn't available to you, self-palpation of these muscles is possible by inserting your finger vaginally to feel for a squeeze and lift of the muscles when contracting the pelvic floor, and a release or letting go when relaxing the pelvic floor.<sup>7</sup>

## **As you recover from birth, you can do Kegel exercises regularly to help strengthen the muscles of the pelvic floor that have become weakened during pregnancy and childbirth.**

1. To get started, identify your pelvic floor muscles and practice your technique.
2. Imagine that you're sitting on a marble and tighten your pelvic muscles as if you're lifting the marble.
3. Do this for three seconds and relax for three seconds.
4. As you engage your pelvic floor muscles, be careful not to activate the muscles in your abdomen, thighs, or buttocks muscles.
5. Exhale as you contract your pelvic floor muscles.

Since nobody can see when you're doing these exercises, you can do them anytime and anywhere.



“I decided to see a pelvic floor physiotherapist during early pregnancy and again in later-term pregnancy. This allowed me to learn ahead of time what my six-week postpartum recovery plan would look like and gave me some direction for rebuilding my core so that I could return to vigorous activity when I was ready.”

It's important to recognize that Kegel exercises aren't appropriate for everyone and that you may require guidance to learn how to do them correctly. Some individuals have tight pelvic floor muscles that can be made worse by performing Kegels.



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Move slowly with intention at the beginning. Shift your mindset from ‘getting back to my pre-baby body’ and instead focus on what your new normal—and new body—looks and feels like.





# SAFELY RETURNING TO MOVEMENT

**At 6 weeks postpartum, you will visit your healthcare provider to determine whether you are ready to begin physical activity.**

If you had a surgical birth or had tearing during a vaginal birth that required stitches, you may need more time before you begin activity. Low impact exercise can be engaged in following your healthcare providers' clearance through the first 3 months of the postpartum period.<sup>8</sup>

If you had an uncomplicated pregnancy and vaginal delivery, it's generally safe to begin exercising a few days after giving birth or as soon as you feel ready.<sup>9</sup>

Research shows that women often need anywhere from 6- to 9-months to fully recover from labour and delivery.<sup>10</sup> Simply getting adjusted to your postpartum life takes time. Even when you feel mentally ready to re-start movement, your body is likely still healing. **Listen to your body when deciding both when the time is right for you to engage in physical activity and what type of activity is best for you.**

Physical activity is anything that moves your body and can be done in a variety of ways. The options are truly endless, and it's important that you do something that you enjoy. Recognize that you may have to re-imagine what physical activity is as a post-partum woman, at least in the beginning. Not only are you recovering from pregnancy and childbirth, but you're also caring for a highly dependent infant.

Where you are starting from will be based on your pre-pregnancy exercise levels and your recovery from childbirth. It can also depend on your support system and how much rest you're getting. As you continue to make gains in your physical and mental recovery, you will be able to increase the frequency and intensity of exercise. **Remember, it's a marathon not a sprint. Pace yourself accordingly.**

The Canadian Society of Obstetrics and Gynecologists and Canadian Society of Exercise Physiology encourage postpartum women to engage in 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity per week.<sup>4</sup> This could include being active 20 to 30 minutes per day.<sup>5</sup> Even 10 minutes of exercise benefits your body.



Postpartum exercise isn't one-size-fits-all. Get creative and try different types of exercise, stretching, sports, or ways to move your body. Try consulting fitness advisors, friends, or family to hear their strategies and what they've done.

**Consider focusing on moving the body’s major muscle groups, such as the legs, arms, and hips. Initial recommendations following healthcare provider clearance may include:**



### **Diaphragmatic breathing or “belly breathing”**

This breathing technique is a great exercise to begin with as it’s low-impact and involves fully engaging the stomach, abdominal muscles, and diaphragm. You can do this exercise lying down, but as you gain more practice, you can do it sitting upright in a chair. To begin, place one hand on your upper chest. Breathe in slowly through your nose so that your stomach moves out against your hand. Tighten your stomach muscles and pelvic floor, letting them fall inward as you exhale through pursed lips. The hand on your upper chest must remain as still as possible. Exhale through the mouth slowly while drawing the pelvic floor up.



### **Light stretching and movement**

After 9 months of pregnancy, your body will benefit from stretching and light bodyweight exercise. For instance, you can complete abdominal exercises to re-engage your core muscles. Lie on your side with your knees slightly bent and allow your stomach to fully relax. As you breathe out, draw in your stomach while engaging your pelvic floor muscles. Hold for a count of 10 while breathing normally and then release.



### **Walking**

Walking gives you an opportunity to spend time outdoors and with your baby if you choose to take a stroller or infant carrier. Increasing your walking distance, speed, and/or intensity is a great way to begin to progress your exercise. Adding in hills will help get your heart rate up. It’s also a great activity that is free and can be done directly from your front door. If the weather is poor, consider walking in an indoor facility like a shopping mall.



### **Yoga**

Postpartum yoga is a form of low intensity yoga that focuses on restoration and recovery after giving birth. Look for a class you can follow online or a community program in your area.



### **Swimming**

Swimming has also been recommended as a great low-impact option to return to physical activity with both muscle strengthening and cardiorespiratory benefits. Experts recommend waiting at least 4 weeks post-birth to swim, as it typically takes this long for the cervix to close. Swimming prior to this can invite unwanted bacteria. If you had a C-section, it is recommended to wait at least 6 weeks or until your incision has healed properly.



### **Cycling**

If you feel comfortable doing so and have access to an indoor exercise bike or an opportunity to ride on flat ground outside, cycling is a low impact activity that is encouraged after clearance. Be sure that you aren’t experiencing any pelvic floor (or incision) pain when in the seated position on the bike saddle.



### **Postpartum fitness classes or exercise groups:**

Check with your local fitness clubs or community centres for postpartum classes where you and your baby can participate and/or where childcare is provided. These classes offer an opportunity to access social support and connect with other mothers. This may include mom and baby yoga, aquafit or baby bootcamp classes.

## MOVING FORWARD WITH EXERCISE

Once you are ready to add more to your physical activity routine, consider incorporating muscle-strengthening exercises.<sup>12,5</sup>

Your abdominal muscles have been substantially stretched throughout pregnancy or cut during a surgical birth. Therefore, it's important to be cautious with the movements and exercises you choose.<sup>13</sup> Consider starting with using your bodyweight for exercises. Bodyweight exercises are convenient, easy, and accessible. They can also be modified for whatever fitness level you are at. These exercises can help increase mobility and stability, which is crucial as you readjust to your new postpartum body.

### Consider the following bodyweight exercises for starters:

- » Squats
- » Lunges
- » Bridges
- » Core stabilization

See how many repetitions you can do with proper form, then rest and repeat 3 times. Work to increase the number of repetitions you can do in each session. When you can do 20 with proper form, it's time to add weight.

Moderate-to-vigorous exercise, such as running, can be gradually incorporated into your routine between 3- and 6-months post-partum if you're comfortable doing so. If you exercised vigorously before pregnancy or are a competitive athlete, you can work up to more vigorous intensities. Consider following a progressive running program that allows for intervals of walking and jogging before continuous running.

If there is any vaginal heaviness, urine loss, or back pain during or after exercise, reduce the intensity level and seek advice from a healthcare professional (see section on pelvic health, page 10).



## EXERCISING WITH YOUR BABY

Perhaps you don't feel you have the time to go to a fitness class, you don't have childcare, or you don't feel comfortable being away from your infant. That's okay!

There are many ways that you can engage in physical activity with your infant that are enjoyable for both you and your baby. The best part is that these can be done at home and at a time that is convenient for both you and your baby.

### Key tips for exercising with your baby

Many mothers place value on being able to manage their baby while still being physically active. In fact, several of the mothers we spoke with talked about the importance of doing physical activity that they could 'fit in' to daily life in short bouts. Over time, you will be able to do more with your baby present than you may have originally thought.

It's important to have flexible expectations about being physically active. Be prepared for interruptions in your workout. A baby may wake up from their nap earlier than you anticipated or spit up during tummy time, forcing you to hit the pause button. These things happen! Be willing to swap out a structured workout on a challenging day. You're still engaging in strength training by rocking and holding a fussy baby. If a window of time presents itself later in the day, perhaps you can try again. If you are an athlete, it may help to think of this phase as the off-season. Things are slower and any movement is in preparation for when the season starts back up.

One thing to consider is how you can adapt your routine as your baby develops and is more active. For example, if your baby tires of long walks in the stroller, consider increasing the intensity and doing shorter bouts of harder work so that your baby doesn't have to be in the stroller for as long. This will also allow you to improve your aerobic fitness. If your baby has progressed to playing at the park, you can fit in a strength workout by doing squats and lunges while pushing them in the swing or push ups and planks while they are playing.





**Consider the following ways that you can include your baby in your physical activity routine:**

- » When holding or rocking your baby, be mindful of maintaining good posture and contract your abdominal and pelvic floor muscles
- » Do bodyweight exercises at home while your baby is doing tummy time, or in the Jolly Jumper, so you can be physically active together
- » Go for a walk with your baby in an infant carrier or stroller
- » As noted earlier, if you have older children, consider doing exercise when at the playground
- » Simply keeping up with your baby might be enough physical activity. You'd be surprised how busy they keep you!

**Remember that every little bit counts!**

When you're ready to progress to strength-based exercise, your baby's weight is a natural place to start. This can be done by holding your baby (in place of a weight such as a dumbbell or kettlebell) or performing exercises with your baby in an infant carrier. Your infant can serve as a natural progression in resistance as they will get heavier as you get stronger. You can also progress by adding in light weight. Wrist or ankle weights are also great to consider because they boost the intensity of your exercise and allow you to keep your hands free.

Doing infant-weight exercises is a great opportunity for mom and baby bonding. Here are a few examples to help get you started:

- » Baby dancing
- » Baby overhead press
- » Walking lunges
- » Baby weight squats
- » Peek-a-boo push ups, as illustrated in the photo above
- » Baby bench press





## GREEN EXERCISE: CONNECTING WITH NATURE

Being physically active outdoors is an easy, low-cost way to boost your mental health. Being active in nature, known as “green exercise”, can help reduce anxiety and stress. Being outside can also increase enjoyment of exercise.<sup>14</sup>

### **Consider the following ways to get you and/or your family active in nature:**

- » Go for a walk (or jog) in the park, woods, or along a waterfront
- » Take your older children to a local park or green space
- » Go on a picnic
- » Garden or do lawncare
- » Climb up a hill or go for a hike
- » Go for a bicycle ride
- » Go for an outdoor swim
- » Do strength exercises at a park

### **Nature can also positively impact your baby, including:**

- » Regulating their circadian rhythms from sunlight exposure, including secretion of melatonin (or “sleep hormone”)
- » Exposure to new sensations helping with brain development



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Seeing different moms, with different post-partum bodies – some of them looking like they never had a baby – and then some of them who are more like me, where they’ve got a little bit of extra weight. Knowing that you’re not the only one that struggles with that is important.”





## PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND BREASTFEEDING



Regular exercise is safe when breastfeeding and will not interfere with your milk supply or your baby's growth<sup>15</sup>. If vigorous exercise is a priority during the first few months of breastfeeding, consider feeding your baby before your workout or pumping before your workout and feeding your baby the pumped breast milk afterward. Alternatively, exercise first and then take a shower, express a few milliliters of breast milk and, after a half-hour or an hour, offer the breast.

### Consider the following tips:

- » Nurse your baby before exercising to avoid the discomfort of engorged breasts. An added bonus is that you can enjoy your exercise more knowing your baby's belly is full!
- » Wear a supportive sports bra.
- » If you're breastfeeding, stay hydrated. Keep a water bottle handy during your workout, and drink plenty of fluids throughout the day.

## WEIGHT LOSS AND WEIGHT RETENTION

“Shift your mindset from ‘getting back to my pre-baby body’. Instead focus on what your new body can do, how it feels, and how it moves.”

Often, one of the first things that mothers think about as they recover from childbirth is the changes to their bodies. Many women desire to return to their pre-pregnancy body weight. For some women, postpartum weight loss happens readily, while others may have to adjust to a few extra pounds. On average, women are 1.5 kg heavier at 1-year postpartum compared to their early pregnancy weight.<sup>16</sup>

More frequent exercise is associated with lower postpartum weight retention.<sup>16</sup> However, keep in mind that exercise alone does not always lead to weight loss and additional nutritional intervention may be needed. Exercise paired with healthy eating habits will produce the best results, physically and mentally, for your postpartum body.

### Remember that regardless of weight loss:

- » Moving your body is an important part of postpartum recovery and will benefit your mental and physical health.
- » Your body is amazing (you just grew a tiny human). It will take time to lose weight and/or gain strength.



# NUTRITION AND HYDRATION

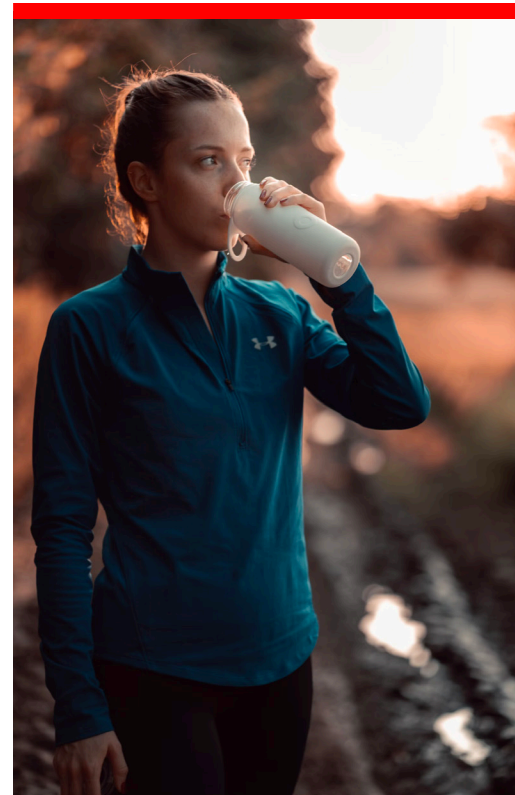
Putting yourself first starts with how you fuel your body. If you're breastfeeding, eating and drinking well is important for both you and your infant. Whether you are breast or bottle feeding, what you eat can affect your mental wellbeing and how fatigued you feel. Here are a few tips to help keep your mind and body nourished:<sup>17,18</sup>

Choose a wide variety of foods from all food groups in Canada's Food Guide.<sup>19</sup> If you're quite active, you may need an additional 2-3 servings. The energy requirements for lactation are approximately 350-400 calories in the first year, which may promote a slow and gradual reduction in body weight.

**Drink water often, aiming for 12 cups/day if you're breastfeeding or 9 cups/day if you're bottle feeding. If you are more active or thirsty, increase your fluid intake.**

Having healthy snacks at your fingertips (and that can be eaten with one hand) will allow you to have an easy source of energy. Consider ready-made snacks that are high in protein. Protein-filled snacks, such as nuts or carrot-bran muffins, can increase feelings of fullness. Hormones that help to regulate breastmilk can also make you feel hungry. Avoid supplying your body with simple sugars that won't keep you full. This is where you can ask for support! Often those who want to help you don't know where to start. Ask for healthy snack drop-offs that can be eaten on the go or prepared dinners you can pop in the oven to support your transition into physical activity.

Continue to take your prenatal vitamin in the postpartum period or take a multivitamin to ensure that you are getting adequate amount of essential nutrients.





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Exercise is empowering. Motherhood comes with many expectations, pressures, and opinions from others that can feel quite overwhelming. Making space to move your body can cut through these negative thoughts and help you feel accomplished and powerful.





# SLEEP

**Remember sleep? It's probably something you feel you will never do again. Sleep disturbances and altered sleep patterns are normal and related to newborn sleep and feeding patterns.<sup>20</sup>**

Sleep deprivation can take a toll on your health. Sleep plays a role in several important processes that help your body to function, such as energy regulation and hormone secretion.

Listen to your body. If you planned a challenging workout after a particularly sleepless night, consider an easier outdoor walk instead. Fitting in some form of physical activity, even gentle movement, can still be beneficial. In fact, research shows that physical activity can improve feelings of energy and tiredness.<sup>21</sup> However, it's all about balance. If you're not sleeping enough and you need to prioritize your time, consider whether taking a nap may be better for your health than fitting in exercise.



# POSTPARTUM DEPRESSION

Postpartum depression can be experienced by a mother within the first few weeks up to 1 year after having a baby. It's normal to feel a bit down after having a baby, but this should not last more than 2 weeks or interfere with your ability to take care of yourself or your baby.

If you feel you may have postpartum depression, talk to your healthcare provider about how you can get help.

From postpartum depression to the “baby blues,” regular physical activity is one way that all new moms can fortify their mental health. Physical activity had the potential to reduce anxiety and promote mental wellbeing.<sup>22-24</sup> A short walk might be all you need to increase your energy and lighten your mood.



“Mentally, I'm struggling with the flashbacks to what happened during the birth...I'm dealing with a lot of anxiety and a bit of depression too...it's made me put some weight on... from emotional eating...and I'm so tired, I can't really get myself motivated to exercise how I used to.”

**03**

**STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT  
YOUR PHYSICAL ACTIVITY  
JOURNEY**



# SOCIAL SUPPORT: IT TAKES A VILLAGE

Close family and friends likely see and experience the challenges you face as you adapt to your new way of life with an infant. Seek out support from these individuals when you need it. Support can come in many forms, including:<sup>25</sup>

## Emotional support

This type of support is when a person offers concern or comfort for another, such as offering genuine encouragement for your physical activity engagement, helping you stay accountable to your routine, or showing compassion when you choose to go for a walk instead of a run because you're exhausted.

## Instrumental support

This type of support is when a person provides tangible assistance or help in physical ways, such as providing childcare, running errands, helping with chores, or meal preparation.

Exercising with others is a fantastic way to increase commitment to exercise and increase your social support networks.<sup>26</sup> Finding other mothers in your community that have recently given birth and are interested in being physically active together can be a great way to set yourself up for success.

Group activities, such as stroller walking or hiking, can help hold you accountable to your physical activity goals while providing emotional support through the up and downs of motherhood. Mom and baby fitness classes are another great way to meet other moms and increase your confidence to engage in physical activity. Or perhaps you need some time without baby (that's okay too!). Consider joining a sports league and take advantage of your teammates, family, and friends to help with childcare. You deserve time for yourself. Don't be afraid to use your support system!

Not quite ready for physical activity yet? That's okay. Consider joining a mom's group on social media. Even if you aren't up for physical activity quite yet, having a community of mothers to support your journey through parenthood is vital in the early years and beyond.



“Seeing other moms, obviously you feel so strongly; ‘oh okay we can do this!’ you’re not alone... everybody’s sharing their struggle as well...and not just the exercise part, but being a new mother as well.”

# FINDING YOUR STRIDE

Returning to physical activity can be challenging when you're sleep deprived, struggling to adjust to a new postpartum body, and learning all about your new infant. Here are a few evidence-informed strategies that can help you stay motivated and accountable to yourself, while also supporting your mental and physical health:

## 1. Start small.

Sometimes the hardest part is getting started. Your body has been through a lot, and you're likely not starting at the same point that you were pre-baby. Even a short walk can make a world of difference for your physical and mental health.

## 2. Reflect on your values.

Reflecting on your intentions around being physically active can help you better understand yourself. Completing the following sentences may be a good first place to start:

I enjoy physical activity because...

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Being physically active is important to me as it allowss me to...

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“Having a WHY can make or break you from keeping a routine, especially postpartum. Since becoming a Mom, my WHY is—and will always be—my children. Giving my kids the best version of myself is what I owe them and that’s what keeps me moving.”

It can be helpful to write these statements down in a journal or notebook. You may also wish to use a Sticky Note and place the note somewhere that will act as a constant reminder and motivation for you (such as on the fridge or bathroom mirror). Consider also using inspirational quotes as both reminders and motivators.

## 3. Set goals.

One of the best ways to keep yourself accountable is to set short- and long-term goals for your physical activity. Consider using the SMART acronym: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Time-oriented. For instance, a short-term SMART goal may be to do 10 push-ups once per day for the next 10 weeks. A long-term SMART goal may be to sign up and complete a 5k race at 1 year postpartum.

Setting goals that are within your control are crucial. Women often set weight-related goals as they work toward shedding excess weight from

pregnancy. However, there are a lot of additional factors, such as your hormones, that don't necessarily allow you to be fully in control of your weight. We recommend setting goals that focus on health, wellbeing and enjoyment.

#### **4. Make it fun!**

Put enjoyment first and try not to get caught up in the numbers, like weight, time or distance. The most important part is that you are moving your body and having fun doing it!

#### **5. Be flexible and proactive.**

Remember that adaptation is key as your infant develops. Your infant's needs and routines (or lack thereof) will change, but if you're flexible and proactive in prioritizing your physical activity, you will be able to keep it up!

#### **6. Surround yourself with supportive people.**

Your support system is crucial. Whether this support comes from a partner's encouragement, having a family neighbour or neighbour help with childcare, or finding an exercise partner, social support can make a huge difference in your physical activity journey.



“It can be hard to abide by a physical activity plan when babies don't operate on a schedule. Ensure that you're flexible with your expectations and recognize that something is better than nothing.”





“

Don't beat yourself up if your baby's schedule (or lack there of) prevents you from being active. Try to fit in when and where you can.





# PLANNING FOR BARRIERS

There will be many ups and downs in your first year (and beyond) of caring for yourself and your child. Sometimes, finding time for exercise can be challenging. Hormonal changes can make you emotional and some days you might feel too tired to be physically active. That is okay! Don't give up. Tomorrow is a new day to start fresh and move your body.

## What barriers can you expect and how do you plan for them?

You may have finally found a physical activity routine that works for you and then your infant has a sleep regression or achieves a big movement milestone, forcing you to adapt your routine.<sup>27</sup> Such changes in a routine are normal and give you the opportunity to practice being adaptable and committed to your physical activity goals. Rest is extremely important for the body. It's not a wasted day to listen to your body and adjust accordingly.

Seek the support of your partner, family and friends. Schedule time for physical activity. Exercise with a friend to stay motivated. Include your baby, either in a stroller while you walk or lying next to you on the floor while you do abdominal exercises. Reach out to other mothers through your own social network or online. They are likely experiencing the same ups and downs.

Anticipate and plan for challenges that might disrupt your physical activity routine. For example, consider how you may choose to include physical activity into your day if you had planned to ride your exercise bike during your infant's nap, but they wake up after 10 minutes. Or if your daily stroller walk is upended by stormy weather. Make a plan for how you can integrate physical activity into your day in other ways, and it won't feel like such a challenge after all!



“

“Since becoming a mom, I have a healthier balance with my family-exercise-work life, and the best part is that I'm not sacrificing any of my fitness! I've found a way to be active in a way I never thought possible as a mom. It's not always easy, but it does get easier!”



## BE KIND TO YOURSELF



New mothers often under- or overestimate personal capacity for physical activity,<sup>28</sup> which can lead to anger and frustration. Treating yourself with the same kindness and concern as you would a friend is called self-compassion.<sup>29, 30</sup>

We tend to be harder on ourselves than we would be on someone else. As you navigate motherhood, you will likely experience ups and downs. Pregnancy and childbirth result in a dramatic change in body shape and size. Don't get caught up in the past. Instead, focus on the journey ahead. Remember, the future is a bright one especially with children in your life. Physical activity can improve body image through toning and muscle strengthening even if weight loss isn't achieved. In addition, improving physical fitness allows you to keep up with the demands of your growing family.

“As you ride the ups and downs of new motherhood, remember that this ambivalence is normal.”

Self-compassion not only enhances physical and mental health, but it can also influence your physical activity engagement.<sup>31</sup> Research shows that new mothers who have higher self-compassion experience less guilt in taking time away from motherhood duties to engage in health-promoting behaviours such as physical activity.<sup>32,33</sup>

### To practice self-compassion:

- » **Be kind to yourself.** Accept days when your physical activity did not happen or go as planned. Tomorrow is a new day. Work to get back on track instead of giving up.<sup>34</sup>
- » **Practice mindfulness.** Shift from self-criticism to more constructive thoughts. Reflect on the progress you have made and set realistic goals.<sup>35</sup>
- » **Consider our common humanity.** Remind yourself that you aren't alone, and that many other women are experiencing similar challenges in balancing these identities.<sup>34</sup>

# DAILY REMINDERS



**01.**

Listen to your body,  
and pay special attention to your pelvic floor

**02.**

Remember it's a marathon,  
not a sprint

**03.**

Be flexible and adaptable



**04.**

Get outside

**05.**

Re-imagine physical activity

**06.**

Be kind to yourself



**07.**

Ask for help

**08.**

You will find a sense of normalcy again.  
It does get easier!



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## **Want to learn more about this topic?**

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## **Questions? Comments?**

We'd love to hear from you.

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