

Back to You (part 1)

Ok so you got through the pregnancy, survived the delivery and have a beautiful baby or two to show for it. In rush the jelly belly, the sore boobs, the achy hips and sleepless nights. Not to mention your new role as a mum makes this one of the most challenging times to find your feet and take time out for yourself.

We have all heard that exercise is good for you, however when tired, exhausted, emotional and most likely stressed it seems like the last thing you might want to contemplate. So why do the experts place so much importance on exercise? The benefits of exercise can be crucial to surviving this new role. There are many chemicals produced when exercising, but the ones we really need during this postnatal period are endorphins: these are your happy hormones. They help reduce pain and stimulate feelings of euphoria.

Postnatal Depression (PND) is on the tip of everyone's tongue after you have a baby. We all hear about it, some of us know a friend who has suffered from it or we have even experienced it for ourselves. So what exactly is it? 1 in 10 women will suffer from Postnatal Depression. Although linked closely with the initial four weeks post delivery it can occur anytime within the first year. Symptoms include low mood, lack of interest in yourself and your baby, no motivation, feeling irritable, feelings of inadequacy, guilt or rejection, poor concentration and feeling unable to cope. The symptoms for PND are there most days, most of the time, for two or more weeks.

It is not to be confused with Baby blues which occur around day 3 and disappear around day 10. Although some of the symptoms (weepy, anxiety, irritable and feeling low) can mirror PND, they are short lived. Don't go it alone if any of these symptoms apply to you, discuss them with your health visitor or GP. Having PND or even Baby Blues does not make you a bad parent. We cannot be expected to slide into this new role overnight, support and reassurance is key to your survival.

Exercise

While the research is inconclusive about whether Exercise alone can be a treatment for Postnatal Depression, the benefits to Mum cannot be ignored. Mums who took part in a 12 week buggy walking class showed a greater improvement in their PND score, compared with a control group of similar mums who didn't exercise after 12 weeks. Exercise helps to release these happy hormones into your system which lift your mood in the short term and help to reset your brain patterns in the longer term. In fact the benefits go much further. It can help improve self-esteem and self-confidence. It improves mental alertness. It helps reduce frustration with daily problems allowing us to have a more constructive response to disappointments, reducing our overall feelings of stress and tension.

Where to begin

It is important to be aware that for the first 6 -9 months following delivery, our bodies are re-adjusting to life after a baby and for many of us we are at a higher risk of injury. Overnight we have lost our internal support structure and are left with a body whose muscles are over stretched, weak and for many of us sore. We then go on to assume a sitting or stooped position for most of the day while we tend to and feed our babies. Not to mention the hours pacing the floor if baby is fractious. Placing more stress on our bodies.

Beginning a gentle exercise program is a good place to start. For Mums who are breast feeding, exercise does not affect your milk supply, production or taste of milk. The positive affect of endorphins released aide in improving milk production. It has also shown that you would need to exercise at a moderate to high intensity for a prolonged period of time before enough lactate acid is produce to affect the taste of your milk. It is more important to ensure you are wearing the correct supportive bra and that exercise takes place soon after a feed to avoid discomfort.

We are all keen to lose our baby pouches as soon as we can after delivery. Everyone wants to know when they can begin doing sit ups to improve their muscle tone. Stop! The muscles that benefit from sit ups are basically the dressing on the window and in fact by exercising these too soon after delivery we are causing more harm. I know we hear everyone tell us to exercise our pelvic floor, but why it really so important.

The pelvic floor (PF) is the muscle which is responsible for holding everything together. It runs from your pubic bone to your coccyx. Correct activation of this muscle is essential for strengthening those deep abdominal muscles (core) which provide the internal support needed for the spine, and for reducing abdominal separation following pregnancy. In simpler terms it means toned internal muscles, reduced waist lines and smaller baby pouches, not to mention the benefits felt for both partners during sex. Something we might not want to face right now, but would still like to know we can enjoy if the urge ever re-surfaces.

Getting out the door can be a very big hurdle when you have a baby; everything seems to conspire against you. Just when you think you're ready. Baby will decide to puke up a feed, fill its' nappy and more or decide it wants yet another feed. That walk or exercise class will seem a little pointless in the grand scheme of things. Don't let these things put you off, get out for that walk even if you only have ten minutes before the next feed. Even on comparatively dull days the light of the day and the fresh air are beneficial to helping boost your mental well-being. Just three long walks a week can reduce your hip and waist circumference and lower blood pressure (Preventative medicine 2007).

Find out what is on offer. It is a good time to join a postnatal exercise class, or any class where the instructor has experience and knowledge training postnatal clients. Try and get to that exercise class even if you have missed the first half. The benefits to you will make the struggle worthwhile. With each trip out, you and baby will get more organised and before you know it, you will be looking at a trimmer happier healthier you!