

# Bounce back after baby

Want to get back to **PRE-PREGNANCY RUNNING FORM**? Whether you're looking to lose weight or run long distances, here's everything you need to know to get fit after having a baby **WORDS Sarah Ivory**

**E**llie Barnes, 30, is a mum to 10-month-old son Max and co-owner of sports management consultancy, Barnes Fitness ([barnesfitness.co.uk](http://barnesfitness.co.uk)). The rest of the time, she's trains hard as a triathlete. Amazingly, Ellie's running fitness has gone from strength to strength since Max was born. Thanks to a smart post-natal training regime, Ellie has set a winning 10k time of 41.13, clocked her quickest parkrun yet in 18.28 and followed that up with a half marathon PB of 1:23.50. And if that's not impressive enough, she did all this having only given birth to Max less than a year ago.

"I have to be flexible with my training, as Max always takes priority," explains Barnes. "Having Max in the summer helped, as it meant I was out walking in the sunshine with him soon after he was born. After that, it was just a matter of doing what my body was telling me it was ready to do, when it was ready to do it."

Of course, it would have been all too easy for Ellie to put her competitive days behind her, but she finds that training helps her to be a good mum. "I have very few uninterrupted nights' sleep, which undoubtedly affects my energy levels and impacts on my desire to train," she says, "but activity makes me feel so much better and happier. I'm a much more energetic mum after I have exercised, so I make the time to do it." And Ellie's right. Recent research from Bupa reveals that a daily run

is the secret to becoming a Supermum. Of the 1000 UK mums surveyed, those who ran regularly spent more quality time with their children. In fact, a whopping 79 per cent of the running mums claim that running for just 15 minutes a day improves their parenting skills.

The problem, of course, is that running after having a baby isn't easy. Even if you stayed active throughout the pregnancy, you need to ease back into exercise to give your body the best chance of bouncing back without getting hurt. "For the first six weeks (or up to eight weeks if you had a C-section) after your delivery, your priority should be to return to walking," explains

Camilla Lawrence, women's health expert at Six Physio ([sixphysio.com](http://sixphysio.com)). "Begin with 5-10 minute strolls and build the distance up gradually. If you are given the green light by your doctor at the six-week check, you can then start to return to core work, conditioning exercises and low-impact cardio like faster walking, swimming or cycling."

It's a gradual road to running but then your body has been through its greatest endurance test (aka giving birth to your child). "It's important to remember that it's taken you nine months to get through your pregnancy," adds Lawrence, "and it will probably take that long to

completely recover and get back to full fitness again."

## BODY BACK

So you want to morph back to PB shape weeks after giving birth? Reality check! Between 5am wake-up calls and 10pm hour-long feeds, it'll be tough to find the time (never mind the energy) to exercise. But don't be too hard on yourself because jumping back into a running regime isn't the best thing for your body either. "How soon post-natal women start running again varies from individual to individual, depending on things like the type of birth and whether they're breast feeding,"

reveals Alison Beadle, pre and post-natal expert at [livelwellhappy.co.uk](http://livelwellhappy.co.uk), "but all new mums should focus on walking first, so give yourself adequate time to build up your walking fitness in preparation to run."

Unsurprisingly, you'll need to make time for your body to recondition and recover from pregnancy. "Your body has undergone a lot of changes in the past nine months, including an increase in pressure on your

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## Start by walking first to build up gentle exercise

pelvic floor, which can make running a little more of a struggle and lead to frequent toilet stops," warns Sarah Philip, pre and post-natal fitness instructor for Xercise4less. "Extra relaxin [a hormone that increases the flexibility of your soft tissues and therefore your joints] is also released during pregnancy, as it helps allow the baby to pass through the birth canal. This means your joints will be more prone to injury." In fact, data from the NCT

(National Childbirth Trust) warns that the pregnancy hormone relaxin can be elevated for up to five months after birth. These high relaxin levels cause softened muscle tissue that can easily overstretch, and the joints used in running (think: ankles, knees, hips) will be more unstable and at risk of strains, sprains and other injuries.

"The combination of weight gain and the effects of relaxin on the ligaments in the feet and ankle can cause over-pronation," adds

Beadle, "And this can lead to foot, knee or hip issues." Experts warn that it's important to strengthen your feet and ankles before embarking on a post-natal running routine. Try doing simple foot exercises, such as lifting the toes, contracting and releasing the arch of the foot, or scrunching a towel underneath your toes in preparation for running. And it's not just your feet that need a little attention – it pays to build full-body strength with gentle aerobic activity and light resistance work, too. "It's really important to build up your muscle strength and core stability before you

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A Pilates class can be a great way to strengthen weakened abdominal muscles

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return to impact exercise, such as running, as this form of activity puts more strain through the joints," warns Lawrence. "The hormones produced when breast feeding can also have an effect on your soft tissues, so remember to be careful during that time as well."

### CORE MATTERS

Still, the hormone-induced loosening of your joints and ligaments is only part of the story. The muscles in your midsection also go through a lot during pregnancy. As your tummy expands, the connective tissue that joins the two sides of the rectus abdominus (the six-pack muscle) gets thinner and wider. Around two-thirds of pregnant women suffer from diastasis recti, a term given to the separation of the rectus abdominus muscles, which can take up to six weeks to repair. Stretching of the

tummy not only weakens the abdominals, but also damages the support system for the back – and that could lead to back pain later on. "Around 40-60 per cent of postpartum women complain of back and pelvic pain following pregnancy, which can significantly slow down progress to getting back to normal levels of exercise," explains Lawrence.

Excess weight and an altered posture

play a part – "Most women's abdominal, gluteal (bottom) and pelvic floor muscles tend to weaken during pregnancy as a result of the strain they are under and changes to posture," adds Lawrence, "so it's important not to forget these areas when doing ante-natal exercise, and to really focus on strengthening them post-natally." Unfortunately, a weak core can impact everything – from making your back ache to negatively affecting your running technique – so it's vital you spend time getting your belly back before embarking on a running routine.

Your first step in regaining your core strength can begin any time after your six-week check-up with the GP. Look for a qualified trainer – post-natal Pilates can be one of the best forms of exercises for addressing many of the areas that will be weak during the postpartum period, including the core, back and glutes. "Alongside the six-week check with the doctor, many women also choose to see a women's health physio for thorough body check that assesses back and pelvic health, posture, and pelvic floor and abdominal muscle function," adds Lawrence. "This will give you a far better idea of how your body is recovering and where your areas of weakness are."

## GETTING STARTED

Wondering when you can start exercising again? "The best advice I can give you is to listen to your body," says Philp. "Everyone recovers at a different pace, so it's important to increase your stamina gradually to avoid injury. Whatever you do, be sure to complete a thorough warm-up, including a brisk walk and active stretching." For bouncing back after your baby, follow these expert guidelines:

### 1-6/8 WEEKS

#### FOCUS ON: WALKING

Make returning to walking the priority during the first six weeks after delivery (eight weeks if you had a caesarean). Start small with 5-10 minutes of gentle strolling and gradually increase the distance over a few weeks. Listen to your body – if you feel tired the next day, reduce the amount of exercise. Experts also recommend doing kegel exercises, such as contracting the pelvic floor muscles. Visit [nct.org.uk](http://nct.org.uk) for more information about pelvic floor moves.

### 6/8-12 WEEKS

#### FOCUS ON: LOW-IMPACT EXERCISE

After the six-week check with your GP, it's time to increase your aerobic strength by doing more cardio exercise. Walk quickly and consider other forms of low-impact activity, such as swimming or cycling. Intervals on the cross trainer are great, as it will increase your stamina without impacting the joints. Start retraining your core now. Look for a specialist post-natal trainer or class, such as post-natal Pilates. If you have diastasis recti, don't perform abdominal exercises; seek guidance from a physical therapist.

### 12+ WEEKS

#### FOCUS ON: WALK-RUN METHOD

When you have regained core strength and are pain-free, you can begin to return to high-impact exercise, such as jogging. Start with a walk-run programme by alternating between minutes of walking and minutes of running. Gradually increase the amount of time you spend running until you can run a short distance without walking at all. If you run with a buggy, be aware that the pushing action can put more pressure on the abdominal area, gluteal muscles and hamstrings.

## BUGGY BOOTCAMP

A buggy-based workout is a great way to build muscle strength and core stability while bonding with baby. If you've been given the go-ahead to start a postnatal strength routine by your doctor, try these moves to ready your body for running.

### POWER WALKING

Find a 5-10 minute outdoor circuit and start walking whilst pushing the buggy. Alternate between holding

the buggy with both hands, just the left hand and just the right hand. Gradually increase your pace to a fast walk. Advanced: do the same thing but try run-walk.

### WALL SIT

Find a wall space and put the buggy in park, facing the wall. Stand facing the buggy with your back pressed up against the flat wall and feet shoulder-width apart. Squat down until your legs are at a



90-degree angle. Hold the squat position for as long as you can.

### ALTERNATE LUNGE

Place your hands on the handlebar of the buggy and stand tall with your tummy engaged. Push the buggy forwards as you step the left leg forward into a lunge position – your front leg bent at a 90-degree angle and back knee nearly touching the ground. Pull the buggy back as you return the left

leg to standing. Repeat, focusing on pushing and pulling with the arms. Complete 12 repetitions on each side and perform two to three sets.

### SQUAT AND ROLL

Place your hands on the handlebar of the buggy and stand tall with feet shoulder-width apart. Sit back into a squat position, pushing through the heels of your feet. Roll the buggy a few feet away from you, holding the squat position. Pull the buggy back in as you stand up from the squat. Focus on engaging the chest and back muscles as you push and

pull. Repeat 12 times and perform two to three sets.

### TICKLE TOES PLANK

Face the stroller and get into a high plank position – core engaged, body in a straight line and your weight on your hands. Start on your knees and progress to performing a full plank on your toes. Reach up with the right hand to tickle your baby's toes. Put the right hand back down. Reach up with the left hand to tickle toes and then put it back down. Continue alternating hands for as long as possible. You may need to place a mat under your hands and knees.

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After walking, you can progress to cycling, swimming or intervals on a cross trainer

