

Softly,

Zoe Hawkins discovers that recovering your pre-pregnancy body is often best done in baby steps.

► By Zoe Hawkins

softly



My reasons for writing this piece are simple: In a period of just over five years, I have given birth to four size XL and XXL babies. Each time, my centre of gravity has altered from not pregnant, to pregnant, and back again. The ligaments in my hips and pelvis have loosened and adapted to bear the load, and my abdominal muscles have been stretched like the world's biggest beach ball.

To cut a long story short, I want my pre-baby body back, or as close to it as I can get, and I thought that researching and writing about it would be a great way to find out if I was on the right track.

My first stop on my quest for information was a visit to re:ab in Grey Lynn, Auckland, where physiotherapist Stacey Law specialises in rebalancing and strengthening women during the postnatal period (see sidebar). Apart from some lower back, leg and pelvic pain, I didn't think I was having any specific issues but, unfortunately, once she'd taken a good look at me, Stacey had a different opinion.

The good news was that – thanks to diligent squeezing – my pelvic floor was in relatively good shape (phew) and, while it still required attention, even my abdominal separation (called diastasis recti) was better than she'd expected after multiple pregnancies.

The not so good news was that she diagnosed issues with stability in my pelvis and hips, which meant that my

beloved jogging programme was probably not such a great idea, and that I should probably find an alternative form of cardio exercise and soul-cleansing escapism.

Stacey said that a lot of the women she sees are, like me, six months or so post-delivery. While they don't have any one major problems, they often do have several small ones, which without a proper check-up, will usually go undiagnosed and unresolved.

The exercises that Stacey prescribed are designed to gently reknit my abdominal muscles and to stabilise my hips. She has also given me a general awareness of my posture, which is relatively easy to integrate within my daily activities. The exercises themselves are gentle, and they are going to take patience. But when I told Stacey I didn't want to be hobbling around at age 65, she said I would probably be hobbling around well before that. And that is all the motivation I need to make time for as many bent knee fall outs and leg slides as are required. I am adamant to get myself back on track, and I will do it.

BIG CHANGES

The job of a specialist women's health physiotherapist is to try to undo the damage that pregnancy and labour or birth have done to our bodies, and to try and combat the effect of repetitive actions such as feeding, lifting and carrying the baby, explains Stacey. She says that changes occur due to the extra weight we carry as the baby grows, and to the effects of pregnancy hormones in our system. One major contributor is the hormone relaxin, which helps ligaments lengthen to accommodate the baby, and which stays in a woman's body for up to six months after giving birth.

There are four critical areas Stacey believes women should address when recovering from pregnancy:

1 Posture

Postural changes occur both during pregnancy and the post-natal period – if women are aware of where these are, they can understand how to correct them. A postural assessment will help you identify 'neutral spine position', which is the point where load is transferred evenly through all of your vertebrae, with the hip and pubic bones on the same plane – like a flat diamond that you could balance a champagne glass on.

2 Pelvic floor

"It's really important that we check for appropriate activation of the pelvic floor muscles as well as their strength and endurance," says Stacey. "We see many women who think they are activating their pelvic floor correctly when they are actually bearing down with it, which can cause more problems." Many women tense everything (butt, abs, neck and shoulders, feet or face!) when they are trying to strengthen their pelvic floor or hold their breath while lifting their pelvic floor – we want to check that this isn't happening."

3 Lower abdominals

Pregnancy lengthens and weakens these muscles so it's important to activate them properly and then do exercises to strengthen them appropriately. "Our lower abs have a big role to play in our core stability so we want them working for us properly when we do any exercise or activity such as bending, lifting and bathing the baby, to avoid pain or injury," Stacey says.

FOUR CRITICAL AREAS WOMEN SHOULD ADDRESS WHEN RECOVERING FROM PREGNANCY:

- ➔ Posture
- ➔ Pelvic floor
- ➔ Lower abdominals
- ➔ Diastasis recti

4 Diastasis recti

Many of us are aware that a separation can occur in the abdominal muscles during pregnancy, but most women don't realise that if it isn't identified and treated appropriately, it can lead to other complications – and make it really hard to get back your pre-baby belly. Stacey suggests that women consult a professional such as a midwife, obstetrician, physiotherapist, or a specialist personal trainer, who should be able to pick up any problem and give guidance for treatment. "Avoid crunches, planks and heavy lifting until the muscles have knitted back together," she says. For women who have had C-sections, once you have the all clear from your doctor or midwife, get advice on how to gently activate your pelvic floor and abdominals when doing everyday activities such as bending and lifting, and learn how much is too much in that early period. The pressure of pregnancy may have weakened your pelvic floor muscles, and after the six-week mark, it's a great idea to focus on a post-natal programme.

FIT TO BE HAPPY

Doing something you enjoy or are passionate about can make a big difference, says Holistic Midwife Cathy McCormick, who has worked with hundreds of women in their first year of motherhood. Cathy is a mother of three and combines swimming with walking and bush running for her own fitness. She recalls one woman who was a mountainbiker in her former life. She stopped riding for several years after the birth of her first child, but she did subscribe to a mountainbiking magazine to keep her interested and passionate,

and four or five years later, she is back in the saddle and loving it. "Decide that long term, you want to be fit," Cathy advises. "When you first start, swimming or walking seems like such hard work. So bring it back a bit, do twenty minutes, or even just five minutes, and think 'oh that was good', then slowly build up a habit of doing it." Cathy is well aware of the unpredictable nature of motherhood: "If a whole week goes by between sessions, don't worry. Just do it when you remember, because doing something is better than doing nothing."



EATING FOR TWO

Nutrition expert and new mother Angela Berrill says that the nutritional requirements of a breastfeeding mother are the highest they will ever be – even higher than during pregnancy.

“If you are breastfeeding you require an extra 2,000 kilojoules per day compared with an average non-breastfeeding woman and it is important that you are eating nutritionally dense foods that provide lots of important vitamins and minerals,” she says.

Breastfeeding women require:

- Almost 30 percent more protein (1.1g per kilo of bodyweight) than an average non-pregnant or non-breastfeeding woman (0.75g per kilo of bodyweight).
- At least seven serves a day of breads and cereals (compared with six for a woman not pregnant or breastfeeding).

- At least six serves a day of fruit and vegetables (compared with five).
- At least two serves of lean meat, poultry, seafood, eggs, nuts, seeds or and legumes (compared with one).
- Three serves of milk and milk products or alternatives (compared with two)
- Plenty of Omega-3 fatty acids (found in oily fish, flax seeds, walnuts). This nutrient is a building block for babies’ brains and may help with the mother’s moods.
- Ten cups of fluid a day.

Angela says this is not a time to try a low-carbohydrate diet, as carbohydrates are required for the production of lactose in breast milk and provide a range of important micronutrients. Additionally, women that were anaemic during pregnancy, will need to rebuild their iron stores. Iron helps with the production of ‘feel-good’ neurotransmitters in the brain and transports oxygen to the body cells and tissues.

Angela advocates that all people should get the nutrients they need from a balanced diet of whole foods. “It’s about eating a healthy, balanced diet; focusing on foods from all the main food groups.”

AND BACK IN THE REAL WORLD...

Because I have four young kids and I manage to pack quite a bit of other stuff into my days, people often ask how I do it. The answer (other than having a supportive husband) is that I take time where I can to exercise, and that I place

importance on eating well. That is not to say I am faultless – in fact, I go off the rails frequently. If, for example, after a solid 14 hours of child wrangling, I have to turn on the computer to finish a work project, so be it; I may just decide to compensate with a large portion of Whittaker’s finest.

I try to fit two exercise slots into my schedule each week. The midweek session, if I can’t rope in some form of babysitting, often just involves a walk with the kids piled into the buggy and backpack and sometimes we don’t get very far. The weekend exercise slot will be something outside, and by myself, for at least an hour. That way, I always know I’m only a few days away from a bit of time out and I almost always come back from exercise feeling happy and relaxed. I do exercises on the floor most evenings, and housework and playing with kids keeps me on my feet and active, all day every day.

When it comes to food, starting the day with a good breakfast is very important, even though I often have to eat it quickly at the kitchen bench. A great Plan B for me is to make salad sandwiches at the same time as I prepare the kids’ lunchboxes and I eat them for breakfast when I’m driving the eldest child to school, or waiting at swimming lessons. On those days, I’ll have my muesli or poached eggs, at lunchtime. Most of our food is home cooked, but in the days of convenience and snack food, it’s very difficult to eliminate ‘empty calories’ from the family diet. Even a packet of plain biscuits is very tempting when you’re home all day with children, so I simply do my best.

Sometimes I strike a balance, but it’s nearly always short lived. However, keeping reasonably fit, healthy and positive is the only way I know how to stay on top of the crazy but rewarding chaos that is family life. ◀

The time and energy you put into a post-natal recovery programme is significant, and we recommend that you visit a physiotherapist or personal trainer for a check-up and advice at least once a year. To contact-re:ab, go to www.reab.co.nz.