

SHAPE SHIFTERS

CASEY McPIKE talks to physiotherapist Stacey Law to find out the best way to get back up and running after baby

The pull to get into exercise after having a baby is strong for some women, while for others the thought of even lacing up a pair of shoes sees them wanting to hide under a pile of unfolded laundry. There's no doubt that physical activity is something mothers need in their lives, but getting started can be a daunting prospect. Here, physiotherapist Stacey Law from Leto Women's Health offers some sage advice to new mums.

Setting the record straight

If there's one thing that gets Stacey's hackles up, it's when she sees images of postnatal women in the media with headlines about them 'getting their body back'.

As Stacey explains, "Your body has done an incredible thing: it has grown and birthed a whole new human – or humans! – so it's not the body it was before you got pregnant. 'Getting your body back' places undue pressure on women. Your body has changed, but that doesn't need to be a bad thing".

As frustrating as it is to not be able to get your pre-baby jeans past your knees, a focus on how your body functions instead of just how it looks, is the mindset to strive for.

One size does not fit all

There's no hard and fast rule to apply for all women when it comes to getting active again. It's tempting to ask the lycra-clad mum in your coffee group who was playing beach volleyball in her bikini six weeks after giving birth for her exercise plan, but what works for her might not be what works for you.

"If you had a difficult birth, or issues during pregnancy, then the path to fitness is going to be different than for a mother who had a straightforward time," says Stacey. "Everyone's experience of pregnancy and childbirth is different, as is everyone's unique genetic make-up and muscle tone. Comparing

ourselves to others is something we as women need to stop doing, because our experiences and physical composition vary so much. Ideally, every new mother should have an exercise programme tailored to their strength and abilities put together by a women's health physiotherapist."

What's so different about pre- and post-baby bodies?

Pregnancy sees hormones careering through your system, altering the balance of estrogen and progesterone, along with a hormone called relaxin, which helps the ligaments in your pelvis expand. While relaxin's intentions sound

good, for some women it opens the door to a world of pain in their pelvis, hips and back when their ligaments soften too much to offer adequate support. In addition, your abdominal muscles stretch like never before, sometimes resulting in a diastasis recti (separation of the abdominal muscles).

As Stacey points out, "If you've struggled with back/hip/pelvic pain during pregnancy or have a diastasis recti, then a cautious and personally-tailored approach to fitness is an absolute must. Launching into a regime without first being assessed and taught the correct techniques can cause so much damage. Hips widen and muscles move during pregnancy, meaning that you're not exercising the same body you were before. You may notice a bit of a 'landslide' effect on the shape of your bottom, as glutes often lose strength and form when your posture shifts to accommodate a pregnant belly. When your glutes aren't working, the tendons around your hips and knees take the load. Back pain is also a common complaint as abdominal muscles and the pelvic floor need to be retrained to stabilise your core".

'Hips widen and muscles move during pregnancy, meaning that you're not exercising the same body you were before'

Slow and steady wins the race.

Stacey is a strong advocate for a sensible and steady approach to getting fit. "Setting fitness goals and meeting them sensibly is the way to go. I try to strike a balance between being motivating and cautionary, so that the focus is on putting a strong body together while avoiding injury. Exercise is important for both physical

and emotional wellbeing, it keeps us strong and fit enough to keep up with our busy little ones, and showing an interest in fitness sets

mothers up as positive role models for their children. There's nothing I love more than seeing mothers out there being active with their kids".

Even women who were sporty prior to having a baby are not exempt from the sensible and steady route: "women who have run or participated in high impact sports still need to retrain correctly after pregnancy and birth. I often see women who were runners who've thrown themselves back into it and been fine for a while, then between 6-12 months, injuries start to happen".

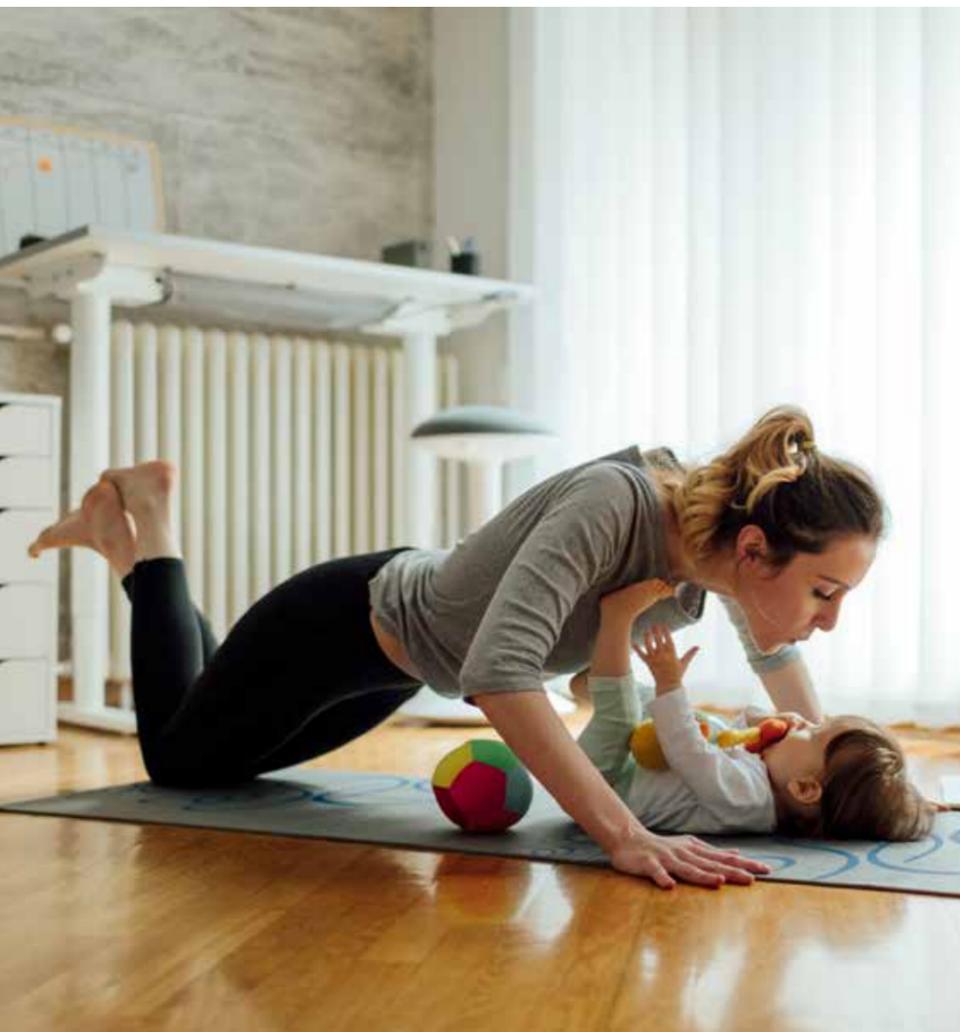
Mix it up

Running and walking are the go-to exercises for many mums, as it's something that can be done while pushing a buggy (bonus: the baby might actually fall asleep), and doesn't involve significant expense (unless you start entering events and lusting after high-end running shoes).

Stacey stresses that adding variety to your exercise regime with complementary activities is vital to support your body. "If you're only doing one thing, such as →

The myth of the 'six week wait'

"There's a common misconception that you have to wait until six weeks postpartum before doing any kind of exercise. If you feel able, you can start sooner with gentle exercises to activate your glutes, pelvic floor and core. If you start early and gently, you'll build a good foundation to start from when you're ready to amp up activity."



5 TIPS FOR MUMS

- 1 Start out slow and sensibly
- 2 Try to get as much rest as you can (easier said than done with a new baby!)
- 3 Ease into it with walks around the block
- 4 Make sure you stretch - at any time
- 5 Aim to gently strengthen your pelvic floor and core

running, mix it up with some pilates, yoga, and strength-training at a gym or at home. Make sure you're working on your core and glutes, to help avoid injury to your back, hips and knees. And please stretch! Stretching can be done at anytime - you haven't missed your window if you don't do it directly after exercise".

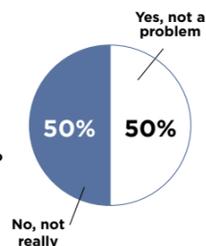
Setting off on the right foot

The best way to get on track is to have a postnatal assessment done by a qualified Women's Health Physiotherapist (check out physiotherapy.org.nz for their list on where to find one). "Seeing a physiotherapist means you'll be armed with the knowledge of where your body is at, and then you can work together to develop a plan that's right for you", says Stacey. "At a postnatal check, we

- Details of your pregnancy and birth
- Condition of your pelvic floor

Treasures®
social community

We asked you on Facebook:
Did you start exercising in the first three months after baby was born?
What you said:



- Any diastasis recti separation (separation of the abdominal muscles)
- Your breathing technique
- Posture
- General wellbeing.

All of this information enables us to recommend what you should (or shouldn't!) do. We work on seeing how you use your muscles, and teach you how to activate them correctly, so that you can get fit while avoiding injury."

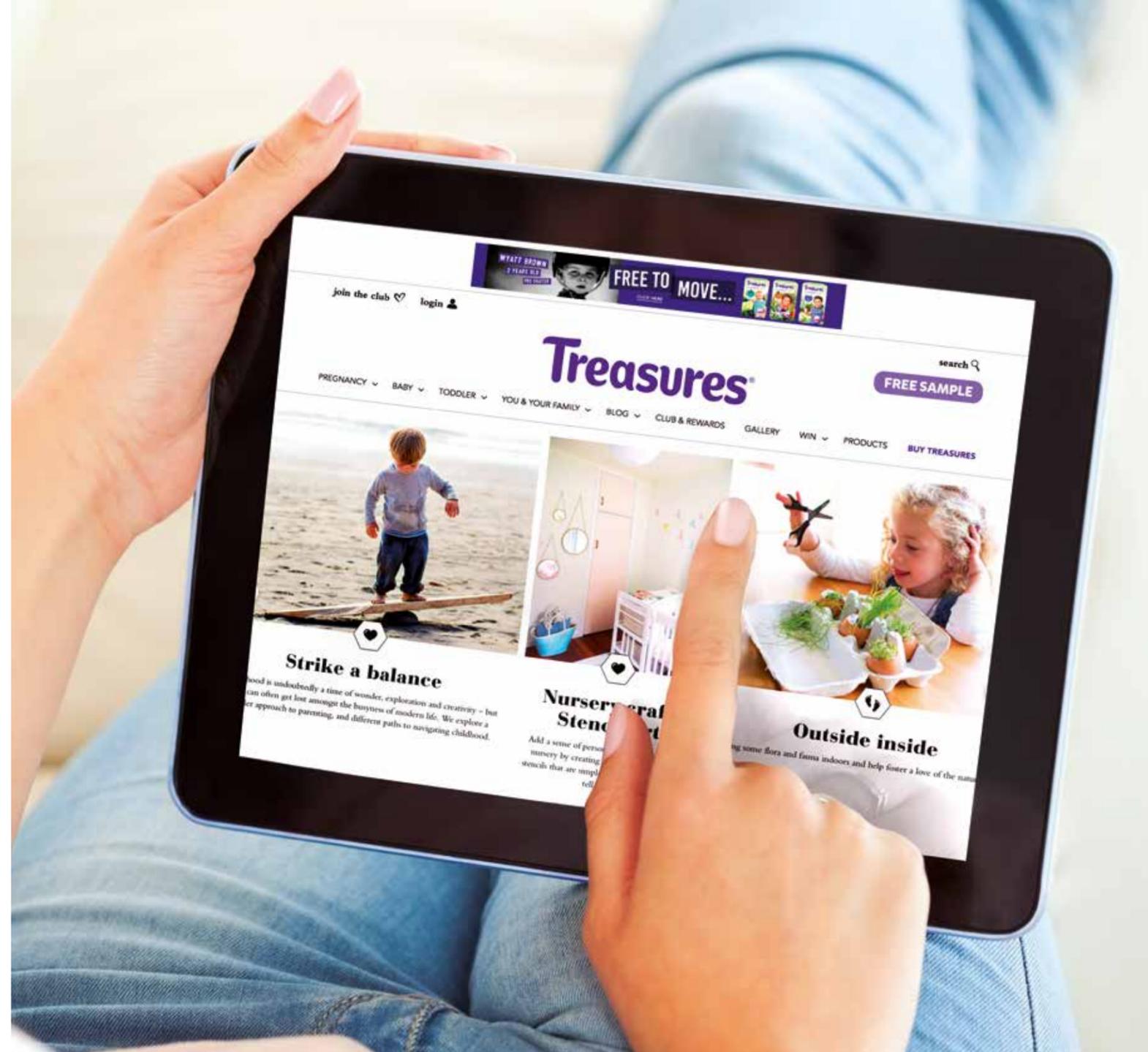
Seeing a Women's Health Physiotherapist isn't as costly or time-consuming as you might imagine, and can help prevent frustrating and painful injury setbacks. "You may only need a couple of visits: one for the postnatal check where we'd help you develop a programme, and then another in four to six weeks to check on your progress and adapt your take-home plan," explains Stacey.

What about all the online programmes out there?

"There are a lot of online programmes available, and while some of them are really good, they're no substitute for a physiotherapist checking your technique in person. We're always happy to help our clients evaluate programmes they're interested in, and help them with their technique to make sure they're following the exercises correctly and safely".

While going along to group activities (such as pilates classes or fitness courses) at set times might seem like an impossible mountain to climb when you have a small baby, they have their benefits. "There are some great courses out there run by trained instructors who understand postnatal recovery. Going along to sessions is a chance to be social with other mums, so can be wonderful for both your physical and mental wellbeing. Some people find it more motivating to exercise with other mums instead of on their own" says Stacey. ■

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