



starting from SCRATCH

The demands of caring for small children mean exercise is the last thing many new parents have time for. OHbaby! fitness expert Renée Vincent gets honest about deconditioning and answers the awkward question of just how fit is unfit.



Quite often I treat women who have been injured by 'overdoing it' while exercising soon after having baby. Keen to get their old body back and to feel fit and strong again, they've done an exercise session similar to what they were used to pre-baby and hurt themselves. At the same time I also see women who are too scared to exercise, knowing that their body has changed so much. Starting from scratch isn't easy, but with a little knowledge you can start exercising again safely and effectively.

Deconditioning is the word we use to describe the loss of physical strength and fitness that occurs when you don't exercise for a period of time. To be as fit and strong after baby as you were before pregnancy, you would need to exercise at a consistent level throughout your pregnancy, so it's inevitable that some deconditioning will occur. In fact, according to the American College of Sports Medicine, just two weeks of not exercising can result in a significant loss of fitness.

Moderate activity during pregnancy or postnatally, such as taking the dog for a walk or doing some gardening, will count towards your strength and fitness. However, if you previously did all of this and also exercised regularly, you would still notice some deconditioning and you'll need to build your formal exercise programme from scratch.

time to assess

Starting from scratch in this context means building your exercise up gradually from your current fitness level. It is really important to take the time to test your fitness level before you start exercising again. This will help you set goals and let you know when you've made progress, but it will also give you some concrete information to guide the type and intensity of exercise you should do. If you have had any pregnancy or postnatal medical complications, or currently have any medical conditions, it is best to check with your doctor before starting an exercise programme.

There are literally dozens of fitness tests you can do, but I have chosen four that test the main components ideal for a postnatal fitness programme. They only take minutes to perform. The first is the step test which measures your cardiovascular fitness – or how puffed and tired you get while exercising. The second and third are the squat and push-up tests to test your leg, upper body, and core strength. The fourth is the sit-and-reach test for flexibility.

mind the gap

I intentionally didn't include an abdominal strength test, even though this is one of the areas that women are most interested in working on after having a baby. The traditional core strength tests are often not safe for new mums to perform.

During pregnancy the abdominals are lengthened and, in many women, the six-pack muscle – the rectus abdominis – separates in such a way that, after delivery, they are left with a large gap between the muscle heads. This is called having a rectus abdominis diastasis (RAD).

A quick self-check is to lie on your back with knees bent up, place your fingers horizontally at your belly button between the two sides of the six-pack muscle. Then lift your head off the ground and do a small curl-up while feeling to see how many fingers fit between the two sides of the muscle. If you have a gap of more than two fingers, then you may have a RAD that needs assessing by a women's health physiotherapist before you start exercising again. You would need to avoid exercises such as curl-ups, sit-ups, full planks, double leg lifts and any rotational or twisting core exercises – in short, any high-intensity core exercises that involve straining hard with the abdomen. How long you should avoid these depends on how severe the RAD is and how quickly it returns to 2cm or less, as well as whether you have any pelvic floor problems or back issues.

To keep core evaluation safe for everyone, rather than a standardised test like the others I describe, I suggest trying out the bird-dog exercise (at right). You'll be able to safely assess your own strength and start building those tummy muscles back up.



bird-dog exercise for core strength

1. Kneel on the floor with hands firmly placed about shoulder-width apart. Make sure that your back is in a neutral posture with your upper back strong and flat, and a slight hollow in your lower back. Activate your abdominals by gently drawing your abdominal wall towards your spine and tighten your pelvic floor muscles.
2. First lift one hand just clear of the floor while balancing on the other hand and the knees. You should be able to do this without moving your spine out of its neutral posture. If you can, then raise the arm level with your shoulder. If you can achieve this, then raise and straighten the opposite leg as well.
3. Hold for 10 seconds then return to hands and knees on ground position. Repeat on the other side.

cardiovascular or aerobic exercise

Cardiovascular or aerobic exercise involves activities that use our larger muscle groups – activities we can do continuously and rhythmically that increase our heart rate and make us breathe harder. Examples are walking or hiking, running or jogging, cycling, water aerobics, rope-skipping, rowing, stair-climbing, swimming, and racquet or team sports. Your aim should be 150-300 minutes per week of moderate exercise (for more, read my article *Time To Go, OHbaby! Magazine*, Issue 28).

When you are exercising at a moderate level, you'll find that, while you're not able to sing, you can still talk easily. If your starting level of fitness is very low, you may have to build up to exercise at a moderate level at the recommended 150-300 minute duration. In this case, you might start by exercising only 60 minutes a week, only 15 minutes at a time, and at a low level, building up your fitness gradually and over time.

It's also important to find an exercise that fits into your lifestyle. After you've had a baby, you're best to start with low-impact exercise such as walking or cycling. Start with 15-30 minutes and, when this becomes easy, speed up your pace and increase your exercise time

to up to 60 minutes. If this is going well and you have no pain in any of your joints, you can then start to incorporate some running. If you are performing more vigorous exercise like running, tennis, fast cycling, or netball, then you should be only aiming to do 75-150 minutes a week.

Always remember that you shouldn't run or do high-impact activities until you are sure that your pelvic floor muscles are working well and until your abdominals are no longer separated further than 2cm. A walk-run programme is a good way to get your heart rate up without overstressing your joints and to gradually build up your running. In a walk-run programme you alternate walking with 1-2 minutes of running, allowing your heart rate to settle a little between bouts of running. You can start by fitting five minutes of running into a 30 minute walk and then gradually increase the number of running minutes. Once you can run 15-20 minutes comfortably, you can then start to prepare for other high-impact activities such as team sports. A quick search online will reveal plenty of walk-run programmes you could follow.

With regard to weight management and cardio exercise, remember that the most important factor in weight loss or weight management is managing your

nutrition. An exercise programme will support your efforts and improve your body composition (muscle versus fat), but should not be your main tool to manage your weight.

muscle strength, endurance, and flexibility

The American Centre for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that adults do muscle-strengthening exercises for all the major muscle groups at least twice a week. Muscle-strengthening or resistance-training can be done in a gym but you can also do it at home using your body weight (eg doing push-ups, squats, lunges, and/or the bird-dog core exercise) or using resistance bands or weights. Again, there are many resources available in the form of books, DVDs, or online to provide you with a home resistance programme. Look for a programme that is aimed at your level, that explains all exercises carefully, and points out the reasons why you would not perform a particular exercise. It should be produced by a qualified personal trainer or health professional and preferably aimed at postnatal recovery.

Adults should also do flexibility exercises 2-3 times a week to improve range of motion. So, allow enough time after your cardiovascular workout to stretch. Each stretch should be firm but comfortable, held for 30 seconds, and repeated 2-4 times. Alternatively, you could use a yoga DVD or join a yoga, Pilates, or combined exercise and stretch class.

Turn the page for details on the various tests and how to assess your level.

OHbaby! fitness expert, Renée Vincent, is a physiotherapist at Total Mums in Auckland and mum to an energetic pre-schooler. The fitness tests she outlines are from topendsports.com.

KEY POINTS IF YOU'RE STARTING FROM SCRATCH

- Be sure to take into account any medical conditions you have, and any physical problems such as a RAD, pelvic floor weakness, or joint or muscle pain.
- It is very helpful to test for fitness, strength, and flexibility before starting so you can be realistic about your new exercise programme.
- Aim to include aerobic exercise, resistance exercise, and stretching into your programme.
- Start at a very achievable and comfortable level, and increase gradually over time.

3-minute step test

you will need: A 30cm step, a stopwatch, and a metronome that beats at 96 beats per minute to give you the timing of your steps. You can download a metronome app online.

what to do: Set the metronome to 96 beats per minute and make sure you can hear the beat. Stand facing the step. When ready to begin, start the clock or stopwatch and march up and down on the step to the metronome beat (up, up, down, down) for three consecutive minutes. (You can rest if you need to, but remain standing.) When three minutes are up, stop immediately, sit down on the step, and count your pulse (use your wrist or neck) for one full minute.



YOUR SCORE, MEASURED IN BEATS PER MINUTE:

YOUR AGE	18-25	26-35	36-45	46-55
Excellent	<85	<88	<90	<94
Good	85-98	88-99	90-102	94-104
Above Average	99-108	100-111	103-110	105-115
Average	109-117	112-119	111-118	116-120
Below Average	118-126	120-126	119-128	121-129
Poor	127-140	127-138	129-140	130-135
Very Poor	>140	>138	>140	>135



modified push-up test

note: Don't do a full push-up position less than six months after giving birth, or if you have a weak pelvic floor or a RAD.

what to do: Begin in a modified push-up position, on the hands and knees with hands shoulder-width apart and elbows fully extended. Drop the hips and move the hands forward until you create a straight line from the knees to the hips and to the shoulders. While keeping a straight position from the knees to the shoulders, lower your upper body so your elbows bend to 90 degrees. Push back up to the start position. That is one rep. Complete as many repetitions as possible, without breaking form, and record your total.

YOUR SCORE, MEASURED IN REPS:

YOUR AGE	20-29	30-39	40-49
Excellent	36 or more	37 or more	31 or more
Good	30-36	30-37	25-31
Above Average	23-29	22-30	18-24
Average	12-22	10-21	8-17
Below Average	0-11	0-9	0-7

squat test

what to do: Stand in front of a chair or bench with your feet shoulder-width apart, facing away from the chair. Place your hands on your hips. Squat down and lightly touch the chair before standing back up. A good-sized chair is one that positions your knees at right angles when you are sitting. Do as many as you can and then write down your total.



YOUR SCORE, MEASURED IN REPS:

YOUR AGE	20-29	30-39	40-49
Excellent	>29	>26	>23
Good	27-29	24-26	21-23
Above Average	24-26	21-23	18-20
Average	21-23	18-20	15-17
Below Average	18-20	15-17	12-14
Poor	15-17	12-14	9-11
Very Poor	<15	<12	<9



sit-and-reach test

you will need: A ruler or measuring tape.

what to do: Remove your shoes and sit on a flat surface, legs extended in front of your body, toes pointing up and feet slightly apart, with the soles of the feet against the base of a step or wall.

Place the ruler on the ground between your legs. Place one hand on top of the other, then reach slowly forward. At the point of your greatest reach, hold for a couple of seconds, and measure how far you have reached.

If you have trouble straightening your legs, get a friend to help by holding your knees down flush with the ground. Measure beyond the base of your foot, or, if you did not reach your toes, measure how far before the feet you were (a negative measurement score).

YOUR SCORE, MEASURED IN CENTIMETRES:

Super	more than +30
Excellent	+21 to +30
Good	+11 to +20
Average	+1 to +10
Below Average	-7 to 0
Poor	-15 to -8
Very poor	less than -15