



WellSpring

Sharing physical activity knowledge

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Physical activity programming for new parents

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Introduction

Having a baby is a life-changing experience—physically, emotionally, and socially. Caring for a newborn or infant is a 24-hour-a-day responsibility, which can feel limiting and drain new parents of energy. As a result, it can be a critical life transition, resulting in decreases in physical activity. With 85% of Canadians becoming parents in their lifetime, the demand for programming to support new parent physical activity is frequent and ongoing.^{1,2}

First-time parents, in particular, can greatly benefit from the effects of physical activity.² Regular physical activity can:

- increase postpartum wellbeing and ease the transition to parenthood;³
- have profound effects on cardiovascular health through the prevention of non-communicable diseases, such as type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease;⁴
- help women lose the weight gained during pregnancy;⁵
- produce mood-enhancing endorphins that support improvements in mild-to-moderate depressive symptoms and increase the likelihood that mild-to-moderate depression will resolve;⁵
- prevent sleep difficulties, strengthen and tone abdominal and pelvic floor muscles (to reduce the risk of future urinary incontinence), boost energy, and relieve stress.^{6,7}

Parents also play an important role in the physical activity of their children. Sedentary behaviour and physical activity levels of parents can strongly influence those of their preschool children, especially girls' levels of activity.⁸ When children see their parents being physically active, they are more likely to be physically active as well. This preschool developmental period is key in the foundation of healthy habits such as being active on a regular basis.⁹

S U M M A R Y

Physical activity can provide parents of newborns and infants with an opportunity to ease the transition to parenthood, while improving both their physical and mental health.

To support parents, the City of Edmonton offers a variety of physical activity programs that not only provide a safe opportunity to exercise, but also support opportunities to meet other parents and socialize. This WellSpring provides an overview of these programs.



How much exercise should women get after having a baby?

As with other Canadian adults, women who have recently had a baby should get at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity every week. The 150 minutes can be divided into 30-minute workouts on five days of the week or into smaller 10-minute sessions throughout each day. Depending on the method of delivery, most types of exercise can be continued or resumed in the postpartum period.

Women who have had a Caesarean section may slowly increase their aerobic and strength training, depending on their level of discomfort and other complicating factors, such as anemia or wound infection.

The 6-week postpartum evaluation is an opportunity for women and their obstetric care providers to discuss these issues.⁷

Stroller-friendly programming

In 1996, there were very few options for new parents to participate in group-based physical activity programs. Shareen Hanke, a fitness pioneer and a new mother herself, saw a need and came up with a solution that would allow parents to get/stay active. Shareen developed and proposed an innovative concept, to the City of Edmonton's recreation leadership, of allowing parents to bring their child/children to classes with them. The City agreed, and Stroller Fit (formerly known as Strollercise) was born.

Although stroller-friendly programming (where kids must stay in their strollers throughout the classes) generally attracts mums with children, some dads come and attend too. These classes are open to everyone, with or without children. This was the beginning of stroller-friendly drop-in classes available through the City of Edmonton recreation centres. It has now expanded to five stroller-friendly drop-in classes at five different recreation centres, with each class lasting 60–75 minutes.

Programs offered in the Edmonton area

Stroller Fit is a functional, total-body conditioning workout combining cardiovascular and resistance training, designed for parents to exercise with their kids in tow in strollers. It allows new parents (and others) to get back into activity with their family.

For new parents, regular physical activity can prevent sleep difficulties, strengthen and tone abdominal and pelvic floor muscles, boost energy, and relieve stress.

Stroller Fit includes a wide variety of cardiovascular activities, such as running (or walking), stairs, and burpees, as well as higher intensity exercises such as jumping jacks and high knees to get the heart rate up. Strengthening activities are key to a return to functional level of fitness and focus on back, core, and pelvic floor exercises. The programming is rounded out with stretching, which can reduce potential injuries and helps participants focus on areas of the body that are often affected by feeding and carrying babies and their associated gear.

The program provides circuit training that intersperses cardiovascular and strength training. This provides a varied workout that does not have the children sitting stationary for long periods, thus reducing the need to stop and tend to unhappy children. In warm weather, some locations will take the classes outdoors to enjoy nearby trails.

Barre Fit with Baby is a dynamic, total-body workout combining Pilates, Ballet and Yoga, utilizing the ballet barre and other equipment. It is designed to strengthen and tone the muscles for moms and dads with babies 6 weeks to 9 months old (before they are mobile). Babies are worn/strapped to the parent's chest during class.

Ignite is another well-rounded program aimed to increase a new parent's metabolism by alternating between cardiovascular and resistance training exercises to increase stamina and muscular endurance.

Hard Core is focused on overall function by working through a variety of core-targeted exercises focusing on strength, stability, and posture.

ALL in 60 is an all-in-one, 60-minute class equally distributed between cardiovascular, resistance training, core activities, and stretching. Each class features different fitness styles.

What are the keys to the success of the City of Edmonton programming?

- All instructors are knowledgeable and certified in pre- and postnatal fitness so that mothers are safe.
- The instructors provide education on some of the postpartum issues around safely and effectively returning to exercise.
- The instructors treat the participants like the strong and successful women (and men) that they are.
- The classes are filled with positive energy.
- The programs are designed to help participants feel strong and healthy in their new roles as parents.
- The workouts are challenging, but are demonstrated at multiple levels so that everyone can be successful regardless of their fitness level.
- Large recreation facilities allow the classes to include a variety of activities.
- "Kids Dens" are available for child minding, which are fun and safe places for children to engage in supervised play while parents are active.
- The classes create social interaction opportunities and a sense of community for new parents.
- The classes allow new parents to get out of the house and exercise inside a great facility.
- The instructors create a supportive environment (friendly, welcoming) where everyone can exercise, progress successfully, and be stronger.

"Kids Dens" are fun, safe places for children to engage in supervised play while parents are active.

Recommendations for instructor certification

When starting a postnatal fitness program, it is important to have instructional staff who are qualified to teach these programs. In Canada, look for one of these certifications.

The **Canadian Society of Exercise Physiology (CSEP)** provides evidence-based training and certification for exercise professionals through the CSEP Professional Standards Program®. Applicants must have completed, at a minimum, an equivalent of two years of full-time study at a post-secondary level in six core competency areas related to the exercise sciences.¹⁰ Some Canadian post-secondary institutions offer diplomas in personal fitness training that include a comprehensive health science education with an emphasis on special populations. These programs are designed to meet the CSEP-Certified Personal Trainer national certification.

fit 4 two® is an organization from British Columbia that offers the *Pre and Postnatal Fitness Specialist (PPFS) Program* for individuals who already have a certification or degree that permits them to do group classes or personal training. This 16-hour course can be taken in class or online. The comprehensive course covers: pre/postnatal anatomy and physiology; current pre/postnatal fitness guidelines; how to choose safe and effective cardiovascular, strength, core, and flexibility exercises for pre/postnatal women; how to design a successful pre/postnatal fitness class; and how to design a successful pre/postnatal personal training program.¹¹

canfitpro™ offers a wide variety of programming, including personal training certification, fitness instructor certification, and workshops on topics such as postpartum retraining and pelvic health.¹²

Alberta Fitness Leadership Certification Association (AFLCA) provides certifications in exercise specialty leadership (Specialty Leaders) and personal training (Certified Fitness Trainer). The AFLCA also has a new Pre Postnatal Exercise certification, which follows the new Canadian Guidelines for Physical Activity Throughout Pregnancy. This certification fills an important gap. Until recently, there was no evidence-informed certification available to exercise professionals in Alberta who wished to include pre- and postnatal women in their group exercise classes. Because of the gap in certification, and insurance and liability concerns, pre/postnatal women were often turned away from group classes in public and private facilities—even though exercise is one of the best things that they could be doing for their health. Now any of the more than 2,400 AFLCA certified fitness professionals who take this certification can include pre/postnatal women in their classes, fully informed by current evidence and insured.

AFLCA certified leaders work in more than 260 Alberta communities, and it is our hope that the new certification will remove barriers and increase access to safe, effective, and evidence-informed exercise for pre- and postnatal women. For more information, visit www.provincialfitnessunit.ca/about-aflca/ or email: info@provincialfitnessunit.ca.



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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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To learn more about family-friendly programming at the City of Edmonton, visit: movelearnplay.edmonton.ca/



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