

Prolapse and running – health professional update

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Prolapse and pelvic support

Pelvic prolapse results from inadequate pelvic floor support. Lack of pelvic floor support is caused by weakness in the pelvic floor muscles and connective tissues. When the pelvic floor muscles and tissues weaken, they become less able to support the pelvic organs (including the bladder, uterus and rectum). The direct result of this lack of support is pelvic prolapse when the pelvic organs protrude into the walls of the vagina (cystocele, rectocele), descend into the vagina (uterine prolapse) and/ or out of the rectum (rectal prolapse).

Who is most at risk of running with a prolapse?

Some runners are more at risk of prolapse problems than others including individuals with:

- Pre-existing prolapse;
- Previous pelvic surgery;
- Pelvic floor muscle weakness and dysfunction;
- Long distance runners; and
- Road runners.

Some women are more at risk of prolapse with running including those:

- During postnatal recovery from childbirth;
- Previous vaginal delivery;
- Following previous traumatic vaginal delivery; (forceps, breech);
- Multiparous (multiple births);
- With menopause and beyond;
- Obese and overweight;
- Suffering chronic constipation and straining;
- With chronic cough; and
- Family history of prolapse.



Is prolapse made worse with running?

Running with a prolapse can further weaken pelvic floor muscles and tissues potentially worsening prolapse severity. The degree to which running impacts upon a prolapse is determined by factors including; body weight, running distances and strength of the pelvic floor.

If you have a prolapse is highly likely that your pelvic floor support is already weakened. The combination of repeated downward pelvic pressure and a lack of pelvic floor support can contribute to prolapse worsening.

Running is a high impact exercise. The impact and pressure associated with body weight landing on a hard surface is transferred down through the pelvic floor and lower limbs to the ground. When repeated over time, the impact of running repeatedly forces the pelvic floor (and prolapse) downwards. When strain is placed upon the pelvic floor, the pelvic floor muscles and tissues stretch and weaken especially if the pelvic floor lacks the strength to withstand this strain. Individuals with prolapse usually have pre-existing pelvic floor dysfunction, so that they lack the capacity to withstand the pressure of high impact exercises like running.

Tips for how to reduce pelvic floor impact and prevent prolapse

This information is not provided to encourage individuals with prolapse towards running. This information recognises that some committed runners will continue to run despite having a prolapse. This information can help prevent prolapse, protect and reduce prolapse symptoms.

Strategies to reduce the impact of running:

1. **Alternate running surfaces** – Avoid constant running on hard surfaces such as roads and concrete pavements. Try to mix up running sessions to include softer running surfaces such as grass, gravel and sand. Water running is an excellent form of low impact running.
2. **Avoid downhill running**- Running on flat surfaces reduces the physical impact when compared with running downhill. Downhill running increases impact and jarring on the pelvic floor.
3. **Limit running distance**- The longer the running distance, the more repeated the impact upon the pelvic floor. Try to avoid running long distances particularly on a regular basis.
4. **Reduce stride length**- Shorter stride length may help to reduce some of the physical impact associated with running. This may allow your heel to strike the ground less forcefully than with a long stride.
5. **Mix up workouts**- Alternate running workouts with other low impact forms of fitness exercises. These include cross trainer and elliptical machines, cycling and spin classes.
6. **Manage your weight**- The more body weight you carry, the more you load the pelvic floor when you run. Pelvic floor strain is more likely in obese and overweight individuals with running, just as lower limb strain is more prevalent amongst overweight runners. Overweight individuals with a prolapse who run greatly increase their likelihood of worsening prolapse.



Tips for how to improve pelvic floor support for exercise

1. **Pelvic floor exercises**- Regular daily pelvic floor exercises will optimise the condition of pelvic floor support in order to withstand the pressure associated with a variety of fitness exercises. A strong well supported pelvic floor will better withstand the pressure and impact associated with running when compared with a weak dysfunctional pelvic floor. Commitment to regular ongoing pelvic exercises is an essential to ensuring and optimising long-term pelvic floor support.
2. **Consider a vaginal pessary**- A vaginal pessary is a discreet pelvic floor support device that sits within the vagina and supports prolapsed vaginal tissues. A vaginal pessary is a useful assistive device for women who seek to continue running despite having a prolapse. Well fitting pessary devices can reduce prolapse symptoms and allow a woman with pelvic floor dysfunction to continue her regular exercise routine. Gynaecologists are usually trained to fit vaginal pessary devices for prolapse support and management and it can be worth discussing your suitability for a pessary.
3. **Ensure post natal recovery**- Before recommencing running, ensure that your pelvic floor is recovered from pregnancy and childbirth. Strengthening for weak muscles can take 5-6 months. Pelvic floor muscles do not function as well during breast feeding owing to the lower levels of circulating oestrogen, so this is important to be mindful of when planning your return to running after childbirth.

"Prolapse and running - health professional update" is by Michelle Kenway, Pelvic Floor Physiotherapist. Michelle is the author and presenter of the internationally acclaimed Inside Out Pelvic Floor Safe Exercise Program for Women consisting of Inside Out – the essential women's guide to pelvic support and Inside Out pelvic floor safe workout DVD.

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