

New moms need workout programs that are less structured, more flexible

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Research by Emily Mailey, assistant professor of kinesiology at Kansas State University, confirmed new moms need flexibility and support to restart fitness programs. Credit: Kansas State University

Often running on empty, new moms may need a bit more flexibility and support to ease back into exercise after giving birth, according to a Kansas State University researcher.

Emily Mailey, assistant professor in kinesiology, said when a mom has survived the first several weeks of having a new baby and is ready to

start adding [exercise](#)—and all of its benefits—back into her life, a more flexible approach works better than a specific regimen. That's according to Mailey's study, recently published in the *Journal of Health Psychology*.

"Specific exercise programs can seem like an insurmountable barrier to new moms," Mailey said. "The results of this study suggest that the idea of encouraging new moms to fit in any kind of activity any way they can might be the best approach for easing back into exercise after giving birth."

As part of the intervention study, Mailey hosted workshops for mothers who had given birth between six weeks to 12 months before the start of the study to discuss strategies for increasing [physical activity](#). All participants wore accelerometers for a week to measure activity before the workshops, immediately after the workshops and six months later. Mailey also specifically measured mothers' perceptions of barriers to exercise.

"Even people who were really active before having kids tend to decrease their physical activity after having kids because they prioritize the baby's needs first," Mailey said. "In the workshops, we talked specifically about guilt and the idea that doing something for yourself is not selfish—it actually might help you be more patient or have more energy for your kids."

Mailey divided the workshop participants into two groups. One group got general advice to increase activity and help with barriers while doing any exercise they chose, including exercise with the baby. The other group got the same advice but it was centered around a regimented running program that is designed to help a sedentary person gradually increase running with 30 minutes of exercise three times a week.

"I went into the study to see if the running program would help new moms find success with getting back into exercise," Mailey said. "It seemed to me that it would be especially appropriate for new moms because it laid out the steps they need to be successful. That's the opposite of what I found."

Moms that were in the flexible group—the group that chose their favorite exercise—increased physical activity slightly more than the regimented running group over six months, but all moms became more proficient at planning exercise into their lives as new moms and perceived time and guilt to be more surmountable barriers.

"It's difficult for a mom to get out of this mindset that her main role is to care for her family," Mailey said. "In the workshops, we talked about how that didn't necessarily need to be at odds with exercising. Being active might actually help moms be better equipped to care for their family by enjoying some of the mental health benefits of exercise."

Time and type of physical activity may have been why the flexible approach had a slight increase in prolonged physical activity.

"Some people hate running and this program didn't change that," Mailey said. "So, the type of exercise might have been one barrier, but another was time. I was surprised by how many people said finding a 30-minute block of time that they can dedicate to exercise was too difficult."

Building confidence in planning around potential barriers is one way moms can successfully balance the demands of motherhood and exercise. For example, Mailey said a kid's sleepless night might make her too tired for her morning workout so she has a backup plan—like a noontime walk or evening dance party. The backup plan gives moms confidence to follow through with exercise.

The exercise shouldn't be something the person hates to do, Mailey said. In the flexible group, she discussed the importance of finding an activity that the moms enjoyed doing and talked about how that activity can be broken into three 10-minute bouts of [activity](#) if needed instead of one 30-minute session a day.

"Maybe all you can do is fit in five minutes here or do 10 minutes there," Mailey said. "By changing your mindset so that everything counts, you can build it into your day and it's more feasible than these 30-minute chunks."

She also advised moms in the flexible group to set realistic measurable goals. For example, the 10,000 steps guideline may be too much for new moms.

"I don't think there is a magic number for steps," Mailey said. "Though 10,000 steps per day is what is thrown out a lot, I encourage people to start with a baseline week just to see how many steps they get normally and then try to increase gradually."

Overall, the workshops gave mothers support and strategies to overcome barriers, but Mailey also tried help mothers see exercise differently.

"Modeling healthy behaviors for our children and talking positively about exercise will help them have a healthy view of exercise, what it is and what it is for," Mailey said.

More information: Emily L Mailey et al, Is a general or specific exercise recommendation more effective for promoting physical activity among postpartum mothers?, *Journal of Health Psychology* (2017). [DOI: 10.1177/1359105316687627](https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105316687627)

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