

# Mountains and motherhood

Dr Keri Wallace speaks to elite trail running mums to find out how they returned to competition fitness after childbirth

## MEET THE EXPERTS

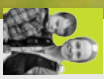


Dr Keri Wallace is a British competitive trail runner with more than 10 years' experience. She is also a mountain rescue team member. Mother of two, Keri recently finished 25th in the Migou Run World Series skyrace, the Ring of Steel, just 10 months after her second baby.



Kasia Enman, USA, Team Salomon, Kasia became World Mountain Running Champion 2011.

Following the birth of her first child in August 2010, who she nursed throughout the race season, Kasia also had a string of podium finishes in the 2012 Sky/Running Series before becoming pregnant with her second child. In August 2017 she finished second in the World Mountain Running Championships (long course) in Italy.



Ohana Azkorrhobetta, Basque, Sponsor Temma, First place in 2017 Buff Epic Trail skyrace, with podium finishes in many other world championships skyraces since 2014. Finished 16th in the 2015 Zegama-Aizkorri World Cup Skyrace just six months after the birth of her second child and was 4th in the same race this year.



Joanna Perkins, is a sports physiotherapist and Pilates teacher with extensive experience in professional sport, specialising in rehabilitation and lumbo-pelvic stability. Joanna has a special interest in women's health and successfully completed a full marathon seven months after the birth of her daughter.



Many mums return to running after having a baby, and some even stronger than before, but the prospect of getting back to race fitness is an especially challenging and familiarly with technical terrain.

Their readiness to return after having a baby depends on a host of factors such as the birth, any complications, confinement postpartum, antenatal fitness and running history. There is no right time; every mother is different. But when that time comes, here are some tips from the pros on how to get back to the trails.

The first and most obvious barrier to running after having a baby is time. To overcome this, running mums need to find their own innovative solutions to the many challenges of motherhood, including regular breast/bottle feeding and lack of sleep. With the support of family, and later flexible childcare or work patterns, it is possible to make the time to run. Having easy access to the trails or mountains from your home certainly helps, as does owning a good breast pump and running buggy (ideal for building a baseline on the flat).

Ultrarunner Kasia Enman believes thinking creatively is the key. "I've grown in my ability to be flexible and creative with my scheduling. It's a juggling act. Whether what works for you is bringing the kids along or carving out the time for yourself is up to you, but it is possible. Skyrazer Ohana Azkorrhobetta works part-time to create a window for her training. With the support of my partner and, sometimes, my mother-in-law, I manage to train around seven hours a week, which is still not much," she says.

Personally, I used one day of childcare a week during maternity leave, to enable me to run in the mountains near my home. The rest of the time I took my girls on buggy runs (they would sleep up to 10 miles) or trained in the evenings when my husband was home. I should say, however, that something always has to give; my house is a terrible mess and I am never on top of the chores!

Another tactic that elite running mums use is planning achievable goals. What length of race and terrain can you train for? How many events can you manage? Can you travel or should races be local? Now that her children are older, Kasia tries to lump her key races into a two- to four-week block, allowing her to make a family holiday out of the season. "My best races are when my family is able to come along. I'm happier that way," she says.



Ohana's Ring of Steel 3rd place finish, with the help of her two children

**'If I have one piece of advice for running mums it would be to defend your training runs from distractions at all costs'**

Ohana takes a similar approach to racing. "My partner and children come to all my races. Race weekends are like little holidays for us. We work as a team and during a race I always look forward to that moment where I cross the finish line with my boys – then I completely forget that I am tired."

### Use your head

The single most important factor in returning to running is your mind-set. If I have one piece of advice to offer new running mums, it would be to defend your training runs from distractions at all costs. As a mum, if you don't run when you're exhausted or don't feel like it, you will never run because you are always tired. In the early years, it helps to focus on the enjoyment and escape that running provides.

"At first, being a mum was a

massive shift in what was important in my life," says Kasia. "I had moments where I considered hanging up the running shoes to focus more on my kids. But it's such an outlet for my mental health that I have come to realise that I wouldn't be as happy, or as good a mum, without it."

Ohana also recognised that while her new role was important, so was running. "I don't go training because I have to prepare for a race; I go because I need it."

Something mums might not expect when returning to the trails is 'running guilt'. Although you can't want to get out the door, you are immediately disabled by a chipping guilt for leaving your baby or for enjoying yourself. I would often ask myself, "Am I a terrible mother?" Instead, I try to remind myself what kind of role model I want to be for my girls. I want to show them that women (and even mums) can be athletes, adventurers and explorers. I want to teach them about commitment and nurture their love for the outdoors. →



And what better way than by living it? Kasia agrees: "There have certainly been times when I have felt guilt, but I know that it's important for my kids to learn that it's OK to do your own thing sometimes, and be an independent person. We try to emphasise that mountain running is about enjoying time in nature, exploring new places and being strong and healthy."

### Monitor your own health

For O'hanna the hardest thing about the early years was the sleep deprivation. "The baby stage is the most challenging because they need you all the time. I used to train after nursing my son to sleep but sometimes I couldn't get out the door because I was just so tired myself. It is important that mums keep a close eye on their own health throughout. It is difficult to make training gains or perform at races in the face of exhaustion.

This is why mums new to running should build mileage and ascent gradually, allowing time for strength and stamina to improve before attempting adventurous mountain runs. Having a child is a major physical and physiological change for the body, with implications for flexibility, balance and core strength. Even if you have stayed active throughout pregnancy, the hormone relaxin remains elevated until several months after weaning. This pregnancy hormone increases the laxity of joint-stabilising ligaments. Returning to running without rehabilitating core elements and pelvic stability can result in injury and more frustrating time away from running. It is all too easy to get over excited when starting back and the temptation is to build volume and ascent too quickly. Instead, train smart and really make your training runs count towards your goal.

Physio Joanna Perkins advises that, once you pass your six-week postnatal check, the first six weeks of a return to training should be spent rebuilding the core elements that will allow efficient and safe running form. This involves gluteal strengthening, pelvic floor and transverses abdominis (deeper abdominal) recruitment and optimising lower limb alignment. On reading the term 'core strength' many women will think 'sit-ups'. But sit-ups are heavy abdominal work, and if started too early can result in long-term damage to abdominal musculature and the pelvic floor.

Providing mums don't have any postpartum health problems, so much comes down to attitude and how much you want it. "I hear people say to me that they don't think they can keep competing at a high level or go on big adventures after having children," says Kasia. "But you can. It's something you love to do, just be resourceful and find a way!"

## REBUILDING YOUR BODY

You can start doing some gentle exercises once you get your six-week postnatal check all-clear

### 1 PELVIC FLOOR EXERCISES (KEGELS)

Start these as early as possible (indeed to do them through the pregnancy) as this will form the basis of your muscular stability and protect/assist with any continence issues. Lie on your back, suck in tummy muscles and squeeze 'up' the pelvic floor. Once you are proficient in these and you don't have any ongoing signs of diastasis recti these can be progressed to more crunch-type exercises.



#### Pelvic lifts

Breathe in and tighten pelvic muscles. Now gently tip the pelvis towards the chest so small of back is pressed against the floor. Hold for 5sec. Repeat 10 times.



#### Alternative heel lifts

Squeeze your pelvic floor and suck in tummy muscles and then lift one leg off the floor. Hold for up to five seconds, slowly lower your foot and relax your muscles. Repeat between five and 10 times.



#### Alternative leg slides

Lie on your back with legs bent and slowly straighten leg before

bringing it back to the bent position. Do the same with the other leg. Repeat five to 10 times.



#### Double heel lifts

As your strength ups, progress to leg raises. Ensuring your pelvis is

flat to the floor, lift one leg, followed by the next to hold them parallel to the floor. Return them individually to the floor. Breathe out on lifting and in on the descent. Repeat five to 10 times.



#### Leg extensions

Lie on floor with knees bent and arms at your sides. Hold your tummy

in by doing your basic breath contraction, then raise alternate legs to table top position. Make sure your back doesn't arch. Extend alternate legs five times each then return feet to floor.

You should discuss readiness to run with a healthcare professional if there were any complications post-delivery - including diastasis recti (separation of the abdominal muscles) as this requires tailored physiotherapy.



### 2 CLAMS 1 AND 2

These target your gluteal muscles to assist in your pelvic stability, allowing you to cope with uneven surfaces, and support correct lower limb alignment. Lying on your side with your feet in line with your

hips and hips stacked on top of each other, slowly lift the top leg, by recruiting your gluteals. Make sure you only rotate from your hip and keep your upper body aligned with the floor, without rolling it back with the hip. Do 10 x 3 sets.



When you feel you have enough strength, repeat the same move with your feet off the floor. You can progress both exercises by adding a resistance band around your knees. As with every exercise, be cautious and only proceed when you feel ready.



### 3 SQUAT TO HEEL RAISE

This will strengthen your quadriceps and gluteal muscles while maintaining correct lower limb alignment, effectively preparing you for running. Stand on one leg with the other leg bent, keeping your pelvic level. Holding onto something for light support, perform a single leg squat ensuring your knee stays in line with your toes (not falling inwards), then straighten the leg and push up onto your toes squeezing your gluteals. Do 15 reps. Build up to 3 sets.



### 4 BRIDGE (INTO HEEL LIFTS)

This exercise further strengthens your gluteals whilst recruiting your pelvic floor and transverses abdominis. Lying on your back with knees bent, arms at your side and engaged pelvic floor, lower abdominals and gluteals, lift your hips into a stability bridge, so your hips are in line with your spine. Raise and lower five times. To increase the effort cross



your arms. Once you are proficient at this hold the bridge and try to keep your pelvis level while lifting alternate legs. To do this go into the bridge, squeeze your legs together, extend alternate legs up in line with your hips, and then lower them without arching your back or rolling your pelvis. Do five each leg, for three sets, with crossed arms for increased effort.



### More online!

Head to the *Trail Running* website for physio Joanna's full video of these exercises. Just go to [www.trailrunningmag.co.uk](http://www.trailrunningmag.co.uk) and click on the fitness section.