

# Can I Exercise with a Stoma?

By Sarah Russell MSc Clinical Exercise Specialist



This is one of the most common questions from people with a new stoma. Straight after surgery it doesn't seem possible. Is it even safe? Will I do myself harm? What sports can I do? Is there anything I should avoid? Will the bag fall off?

I speak from both personal and professional experience. I'm a clinical exercise specialist and I also have a stoma. My stoma wasn't due to cancer, but after five bowel surgeries since 2010 I do understand the challenges. I'm also a runner and have now completed 26 marathons, 16 of which have been with my stoma. I've also climbed Mt Toubkal, run 100 miles in the Himalayas and a 120 mile run through the Rockies in Colorado, all at altitude. The BBC featured [my story](#) in 'Get Inspired' in 2014.

Whilst it can add a challenge to a situation, my stoma honestly doesn't stop me doing anything at all. I camp, hike, climb mountains, run, swim, bike and weight train. I'm not a super athlete, just a middle-aged mum who enjoys an active life. And there are many more people with stomas like me.

Initially however, it doesn't feel like that. I remember coming home from hospital and googling 'disability sport' and wondering if I might now qualify for the Paralympics. Now looking back, that was completely ridiculous. But at the time it felt like my 'bag' might limit me in some way. Now of course, I know better.

Once I got a grip on myself, my second google search was for inspiring people who had stomas. I came across some pretty cool folk and discovered my hero [Rob Hill](#) who had climbed Mt Everest and all 7 of the highest peaks in the world. That was all I needed to know. I figured if you could climb Mt Everest... probably one of the hardest things to do in the world, then I was sure I could do a bit of running.

Since then I've come to meet some amazing people with stomas who do all sorts of incredible things. People who don't just survive, but who thrive and live life to the max.

There are folk who do competitive bodybuilding, rock climbing, professional cycling, swimming, pole dancing, marathon runners, compete in ironman and triathlons, including the amazing [Michelle Willcox](#) who is world champion in triathlon in her age group. The Facebook group '[Ostomy Lifestyle Athletes](#)' is the place to be if you want to be inspired and get advice.



So, in answer to the overall question 'Can I exercise with a stoma?'. The answer is 'Of course you can!'

However, there is a long path from hospital bed/cancer treatment to 'athlete/runner/cyclist/body builder' and it's not a case of jumping straight back into it. A step by step approach is needed and it's going to take time.

There are no set guidelines, no one size fits all approach, and everyone is different.

Your previous fitness, surgery, general health, cancer treatments, age and many other variables will play a part in how quickly you recover and can get back to fitness. So you have to listen to your body – carefully paying attention – and develop your own recovery strategy.

In this mini-series of blog posts, I'll go through some of the most common questions and topics that come up from people with new stomas:

- Core exercises with a stoma – the recovery phase

- Safe core exercises with a stoma – for life

- Rebuilding your confidence and returning to sport after stoma surgery – step by step

- Hydration for sport with a stoma

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Sarah Russell has 25 years' experience as a fitness trainer, clinical exercise specialist, coach, author and health writer. She has an MSc in sport and exercise science and is a qualified cancer rehabilitation specialist and UK athletics running coach. She is passionate about physical activity as a therapy and is considered to be one of the UK's leading experts in the field of exercise/stoma. She has trained hundreds of nurses and clinicians around the world about exercise after stoma surgery and is changing practice. She has lived with a stoma since 2010. [www.sarah-russell.co.uk](http://www.sarah-russell.co.uk)

She offers a 'virtual stoma clinic' via skype/online and her book 'The Bowel Cancer Recovery Toolkit' was published in November 2019.

Her book is available [HERE](#) on Amazon.

