

RCN Fertility Forum Podcast: Fertility and Fitness

Featuring Steph and Aaron Barnett

Learning Objectives for Fertility Nurses

1. Understand how different types of movement, including aerobic, strength, restorative activity, and activities of daily life, positively support fertility, hormone balance, and psychological wellbeing.
2. Develop confidence in giving safe, evidence-based guidance on exercise during pre-conception, stimulation, and treatment cycles, including recognising when patients need specialist support.
3. Identify common patient anxieties and myths around exercise and fertility, and use effective communication strategies to reassure, individualise recommendations, and encourage accessible, sustainable movement habits.

Steph

Welcome back to the Royal College of Nursing Fertility Forum Podcast. I'm really excited about today's episode, where we're exploring a topic many patients ask about, but often feel unsure of: the relationship between fertility and fitness.

Joining us today is Aaron Barnett, Director of Lifestyle and Healthcare at Peppy. Aaron has over 15 years' experience as a personal trainer, including seven years of global teaching and presenting. He specialises in developing creative, accessible movement strategies for people of all abilities.

Thank you so much for joining us today, Aaron.

Aaron Barnett

Thanks for having me. It's a pleasure to be here.

Steph

Let's start with the basics. How does regular movement support reproductive health?

Aaron

Movement is the key word here. It's important to distinguish between movement, exercise, and fitness. Today we're mostly talking about movement and exercise, rather than fitness in its structured sense.

Regular movement supports hormone regulation, improves insulin sensitivity, and helps manage inflammation. For men, movement reduces oxidative stress and supports sperm quality. The psychological benefits are also huge, movement gives people a sense of ownership over their body, helps manage stress and anxiety, and supports mental wellbeing. All of this creates a positive environment for reproductive health.

Steph

When patients ask whether exercise will affect their fertility positively or negatively, where do you begin?

Aaron

I start with reassurance: movement and exercise are safe and beneficial. When exercise is tailored to the individual, it becomes a positive tool in their journey. It doesn't need to be intense or complicated, just personalised, achievable, and approached with a "feel-good" mindset. That means doing things you enjoy or value, and feeling better afterwards, not worse.

Steph

What types of exercise do you recommend for people trying to conceive or starting a fertility journey?

Aaron

A balanced mix works best:

- **Aerobic training** – supports circulation, hormone regulation, and nutrient transport.
- **Strength training** – important for hormone balance and a strong sense of achievement.
- **Restorative practices** – like yoga, Tai Chi, stretching, or slow movement flows to support emotional wellbeing and energy balance.
- **Activities of daily life (ADLs)** – movement throughout the day is often the biggest contributor to health, even more than structured exercise.

Consistency is key. Many people think strength training requires heavy weights, but it doesn't. Body weight or light resistance is often enough.

Steph

How can someone find the right level of intensity?

Aaron

Start with where they are right now. Increase intensity very gradually, sometimes by just one small step at a time. Begin with frequency (how often), then duration, and finally intensity.

For someone who is already very active, instead of stopping intense training abruptly (which they're unlikely to follow), I help them gradually reduce intensity while maintaining frequency or volume so it still feels satisfying.

Steph

What advice would you give to someone who is nervous or embarrassed about starting movement?

Aaron

Normalise their fear. Starting something new is daunting. Use encouraging, non-intimidating language such as "movement" and "activity" instead of "fitness." Keep goals simple and achievable. Mapping out a pathway on paper, showing where they can be in 12 weeks. This helps build confidence and buy-in.

Steph

How should people approach exercise during stimulation and treatment cycles?

Aaron

Take 24 hours off structured exercise after procedures, but gentle movement, like walking is fine. Rebuild gradually. Avoid high-impact or high-intensity exercise and limit extreme rotational movements. Listening to the body is crucial, especially when ovaries are enlarged or the person feels bloated and uncomfortable.

Having a trained coach, ideally someone with women's health experience, can provide safe guidance.

Steph

How do you adapt movement guidance for people with PCOS, endometriosis, or male-factor concerns?

Aaron

For PCOS and endometriosis, strength training and regular movement at moderate intensity can be very beneficial. Focus on quality of movement and avoid pushing to physical extremes.

For men, be mindful of heat exposure around the testicles, especially from tight clothing after exercise. Encourage ventilation and avoid prolonged intense training sessions. At this stage, the goal is health, not peak fitness.

Steph

Are there particular exercises that help with inflammation?

Aaron

It's movement in general rather than a specific exercise. Any activity that increases blood flow and encourages muscle contraction helps with circulation and lymphatic flow. A combination of aerobic movement, strength work, and breath-focused or restorative movement supports inflammation management.

Steph

What signs suggest someone needs specialist or personalised advice before changing their exercise routine?

Aaron

Key signs include:

- Pain or discomfort during or after exercise
- Irregular menstrual cycles
- New or existing chronic health conditions
- Significant weight fluctuations

Rapid weight loss can indicate excessive exercise or restrictive nutrition, which can harm fertility. Anyone facing weight-linked funding criteria may feel pressured, but over-exercising rarely produces sustainable change. Nutrition plays a bigger role in weight management.

Steph

What myths do you hear most often?

Aaron

The biggest myth is that exercise harms fertility. Many people stop exercising altogether due to fear, which often reduces their wellbeing. With the right approach, movement supports fertility, it doesn't hinder it.

Steph

How can nurses support patients who feel anxious about exercise?

Aaron

Normalise their concerns, listen carefully, and use their own language to build a tailored explanation. Start small and help them understand what “safe movement” looks like for them.

Steph

What simple message can fertility nurses safely give about movement?

Aaron

“Move most days.”

Encourage moderate-intensity activity, what feels like a 5–6 out of 10 for the individual. It’s safe, achievable, and effective.

Steph

Are there tools or resources you recommend?

Aaron

Most people have access to health apps with step counters. Aiming for 7,000–10,000 steps per day is a good target. Activity trackers (watches, rings) can also support awareness.

Health coaches and qualified exercise specialists are valuable. Look for coaches with women’s health or pre- and post-natal qualifications, or those listed through reputable organisations like **Burrell Education** or **The Well HQ**.

Do research beyond social media, start with someone’s website to understand their credentials and approach.

Steph

As we finish, what do you hope fertility nurses feel more confident about after listening to this episode?

Aaron

I hope nurses feel confident having those first conversations and creating a positive, reassuring message about movement. You play a powerful role in shaping people’s perceptions of exercise during fertility treatment. Encouraging gentle, regular movement can make a meaningful difference.

Steph

Thank you so much, Aaron. Your advice has been incredibly practical and reassuring. And thank you to our listeners, we hope today's discussion empowers you to guide patients confidently as they navigate movement and fertility.

Join us for future episodes of the RCN Fertility Forum Podcast.