

Physical Activity & Pregnancy

Exercise boosts your immune system and provides the circulation and energy levels needed to help you conceive, enjoy your pregnancy and prepare your body for labour. Women gain an average of two stone during pregnancy, so your muscles and posture are going to be seriously overworked and under strain - even before you have to go through the exhausting process of childbirth! The good news is that the better your cardiovascular system, the more stamina you'll have for the birth.

Exercise also helps with:

- constipation
- backache
- fatigue
- varicose veins
- circulation problems
- meeting other mums-to-be

Exercises to avoid

Contact sports are best avoided after early pregnancy, as are those activities with a high risk of falling from a great height. Usually the foetus is well protected from bumps and falls, but freak accidents could still be dangerous. Anything that puts a strain on your joints or ligaments - such high-impact aerobics, difficult yoga positions or jogging on the road - should be done more gently.

Exercises to enjoy

Activities such as brisk walking, swimming, and gentle toning and stretching classes are ideal during pregnancy. If you were already attending an exercise class before your pregnancy, tell your instructor that you're pregnant. They'll be able to advise you on any parts of the class that are now unsuitable. Exercising in water is safe and enjoyable during pregnancy - and it's great for late pregnancy backache. The water supports your whole body, and you can be as energetic or relaxed as you want.

Your pelvic floor

The pelvic floor is formed of layers of muscle that support the uterus, bowel and bladder. Pregnancy and childbirth put pressure on these muscles, and you may find that you leak wee when you sneeze or cough - this is called 'stress incontinence'. You can tone these muscles so they maintain their strength - and regain it quicker after the birth - by doing regular 'invisible' exercises.

Is there any reason why I shouldn't exercise? Benefits for you

Many women find that recreational exercise helps them to adjust to the physical changes of pregnancy. It may help relieve tiredness, lower back pain and reduce varicose veins and swelling of the feet and ankles, and may help to prevent medical conditions such as gestational diabetes mellitus (diabetes that develops during pregnancy) and hypertension (high blood pressure).

Benefits for your baby

Women who do strength conditioning exercise during pregnancy tend to have a shorter labour time and fewer delivery complications.

Physical injury

During pregnancy you may notice that your joints become looser. You may also notice that you can flex and extend particular parts of your body more than usual, such as your elbows, wrists, fingers, and knees. This is often referred to as hyper-mobility. To reduce the risk of physical injury, you should:

- make sure that you do warm-up and cool-down exercises
- avoid sudden changes of direction, if you are doing aerobic exercise
- consider wearing pelvic support belts during exercise.

Blood sugar level

Blood glucose is a source of energy for both you and the baby. It is important that you eat well during pregnancy and exercise for no more than 45 minutes at a time.

Why aerobic and strength conditioning exercise?

The best forms of recreational exercise during pregnancy are:

- Aerobic exercise, such as swimming, running, fast walking, aqua aerobics or dancing.
- Strength & conditioning exercise, such as weight bearing exercises.

If you do not exercise routinely and you are starting an aerobic exercise programme, you should be advised to begin with no more than 15 minutes continuous exercise three times per week, increasing gradually to a maximum of 30 minute sessions four times a week to daily. If you exercised regularly before pregnancy, you should be able to engage in the same higher intensity exercise programmes, such as running and aerobics, with no adverse effects for you or the baby. As your pregnancy progresses, you should be aiming to gradually reduce your overall activity. Your healthcare professional can give you guidance you on when and how to reduce your exercise.

What kind of recreational exercise should I avoid?

- You should avoid exercises which involve lying flat on your back, particularly after 16 weeks.
- You should avoid contact sports where there is a risk of being hit in the abdomen, such as kickboxing, judo or squash.
- You should take particular care when doing exercises where you could fall, such as horse riding, gymnastics and cycling. You should avoid scuba diving for your entire pregnancy.

How can I be sure not to over-exert myself?

You should always have a warm-up and a cool-down period. During recreational exercise, you should be able to hold a conversation. If you become breathless as you talk, then you are probably exercising too strenuously. If you have any unusual symptoms, you should not continue to exercise.

These may include any of the following:

- dizziness or feeling faint
- headache
- shortness of breath before exertion or whilst exercising

- pain or palpitations in your chest, or pain in your abdomen, back, pelvic girdle or pubic area
- weakness in your muscles
- pain or swelling in your leg/legs
- painful uterine contractions or preterm labour
- fewer movements from baby
- leakage of your 'waters' (amniotic fluid) or bleeding.

Can I exercise if I have a medical condition?

If you have a medical condition such as heart disease or high blood pressure, or develop this during pregnancy, then you should talk with your healthcare professionals (such as cardiologist and obstetrician) before doing any recreational exercise.

Can I exercise immediately after birth?

If you have had an uncomplicated pregnancy and delivery, then you should be able to do mild recreational exercise such as walking and stretching immediately after birth. You should be advised to do pelvic floor exercises after the birth, as this reduces the risk of urinary and faecal incontinence.

Recreational exercise does not affect the amount of milk you produce or its quality. The baby's growth will not be affected.

You should return to the exercise routine you maintained before pregnancy only when you feel ready to do so. You should not try any high impact activity too soon. During pregnancy abdominal muscles are stretched and pulled to the side. You should follow advice of your midwife about when and how to exercise in the first few days and weeks after birth. If you had complications during pregnancy, then you should discuss what exercise is safe to do after birth with a healthcare professional.

Disclaimer:

This information aims to help you and your healthcare team to make the best decisions about your care. It is not meant to replace advice from a member of your healthcare team about your own situation.

Some of the recommendations here may not apply to you; this could be because of an illness you have, your general health or both of these. If you think the care you get does not match what we describe here, discuss this with your doctor, midwife, or another member of your healthcare team.