

Exercise During Pregnancy

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Exercise Basics

Exercise is a healthy component of any woman's life and is particularly important during pregnancy. Regular exercise helps prepare your body for labor and birth, helps you sleep better, reduces constipation, and reduces the risk of certain complications, including high blood pressure and gestational diabetes.



Figure 1 Image from Microsoft Word clip art

Women who were physically active before pregnancy can usually continue with exercise as usual. Modifications may become necessary as pregnancy advances. Activities such as running may become more uncomfortable during the third trimester when your uterus is quite large. Be prepared to seek out alternatives as needed. If you still feel great, continue doing what you enjoy!

Pregnant women should exercise regularly. If you were not exercising before pregnancy, begin by exercising 2-3 times per week. Aim to gradually increase exercise as you become more active. Exercising for 30 minutes per day is optimal. Women who were not physically active before pregnancy should start out slowly. Walking and swimming are both excellent low-intensity exercises for beginners. Distance and speed can be increased as ability increases.

Listen to your body. Changes in your body during pregnancy can make previously easy activities more difficult or uncomfortable. Rest as needed and pay attention to the way you feel.

Water intake should be increased during periods of physical activity. Make sure you are drinking enough water to replace fluids lost through sweating. Your urine should be light in color if you are drinking enough water.



Figure 2 Images from Microsoft Word clip art

If you are very physically active, your caloric intake may need to increase as well. Pregnant women need additional calories and nutritional requirements are heavily influenced by activity level. Make sure you are eating enough to sustain a healthy pregnancy and provide the calories needed to meet the demands of your exercise routine.

Recommended Exercises

If you have an exercise activity that you already enjoyed before pregnancy, it is probably safe to continue. Be sure to ask if you have questions or want to consider modifying your current exercise routine.

Here are some exercises that are particularly beneficial during pregnancy as well as before conception or after birth. Making regular exercise a part of your daily routine has many health benefits for you and your baby. Exercise is also a fantastic way to relieve stress and work toward living a healthier lifestyle.

Practice optimal fetal positioning techniques and take care to use good posture during exercise and at all times. This is important to avoid injury, improve balance, prepare your body for birth, and align your baby into a good position for birth (Tully, n.d.). I recommend reading about good positioning at www.spinningbabies.com.

Daily activities should include:

- Walking
- Forward-leaning inversion
- Proper posture & positioning
- Stretching (calf stretching is very important!)
- Squatting
- Lunges
- Psoas release
- Hip openers
- Pelvic tilts (AKA pelvic rocks, "cat/cow")



Figure 3 Image from Microsoft Word clip art

Use an exercise ball when sitting. You can also use the exercise ball for stretching, moving your hips in a large circular motion, or leaning over the ball for resting. Exercise balls are a great tool during labor too. You can also use your ball to gently bounce your new baby after birth.

Cardiovascular exercise is important throughout life and during pregnancy. Exercises that elevate your heart rate for at least 20 minutes three times a week reduce your risk of heart disease and high blood pressure.

Cardiovascular exercises include running, brisk walking, swimming, aerobics, dancing, belly dancing, or stationary cycling.

Yoga, pilates, and other stretching exercises are good ways to build strength and balance. Care should be taken during pregnancy to avoid overstretching because of the increased tissue relaxation that occurs due to hormonal changes.

Stretching exercises can include pelvic rocks, calf stretches, leg extensions, leg lifts, holding a deep squat position, "bridge" pose, "butterfly" pose, and many others. (Romm, 2014)

Kegel exercises are often recommended during pregnancy for toning the pelvic floor muscles. Kegel exercises involve a controlled tightening, holding, and release of the pelvic floor muscles. You can locate these muscles by stopping the flow of urine when on the toilet. Kegel exercises are done by slowly tightening these muscles, visualizing the "lift" of the muscles like an elevator, holding for about 5-10 seconds, and slowly relaxing the muscles. It is important to avoid holding your breath. Some experts believe Kegels should be performed up to 50 times a day (Frye, 2010) while others do not routinely recommend Kegel exercises or recommend them only in conjunction with squatting and other exercises.

While Kegel exercises do temporarily tighten pelvic floor muscles, contracting these muscles is only a small part of the story and overly tight pelvic floor muscles can be just as bad as weak pelvic floor muscles. Weak pelvic floor muscles can lead to pelvic organ prolapse (POP) when one (or several) pelvic organs move toward the vaginal opening or even protrude from the vagina. A strong core and strong pelvic floor can help avoid POP, back pain, pelvic pain, digestive issues, leaking urine, hemorrhoids, and other conditions. (Romm, 2014)

The most current research indicates the importance of strengthening the pelvic floor muscles through exercises that involve the muscles of the back, abdomen, legs, and buttocks. Strength is needed in all of these areas in order to have a strong, toned pelvic floor that functions in the most optimal way. There is a lack of research regarding long-term effects of Kegel exercises. Short-term studies indicate that Kegel exercises can be effective at improving stress urinary incontinence in women. (Park & Kang, 2014)

Squatting is an excellent exercise during pregnancy as it is good for the pelvic floor, thighs, and buttocks. Squatting should be done in a proper position. Keep your back straight, keep your knees over your ankles, and don't tuck your tailbone under as you squat. Repetition will make this easier and you should be able to squat lower and lower with regular practice.

GOOD SQUATTING POSITION



Figure 4 Image from Microsoft Word clip art

BAD SQUATTING POSITION



Figure 5 Image from Microsoft Word clip art

Exercises to Avoid

There are some exercises or activities that should be avoided during pregnancy for various reasons. These include:

-Exercises that involve lying on your back after the first trimester. This position can reduce blood flow to the baby and cause shortness of breath or low blood pressure. (Frye, 2010)

-Abdominal crunches, plank positions, and other positions that use the abdominal muscles. These

can exacerbate diastasis recti (separation of the abdominal muscles) during pregnancy. Avoid sit-ups, including sitting up when getting out of bed. It is better to roll to your side when getting up out of bed.

-Activities that carry a greater risk of falls or injury, such as rock climbing, skiing, etc. should be avoided by amateurs. Even professional athletes are at risk of injury if a fall or accident should occur.

-Avoid overdoing it. Don't stretch too far or push yourself to beat personal records during pregnancy. Take care to warm up before exercise and cool down after exercise to avoid injury. Don't push yourself to the point of exhaustion.

-Avoid hot yoga, saunas, and hot tubs that can dangerously increase body temperature during pregnancy. (Chan, Natekar & Koren, 2014)

Sources:

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