

The Centre For Women's Reproductive Care

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Pregnancy Exercise

Benefits of Exercise During Pregnancy

Some of the many benefits of exercising regularly throughout your pregnancy include:

- Resistance to fatigue.
- Stronger back muscles, which can help manage back pain and strain as your belly grows.
- Improved posture.
- Smaller gain of body fat.
- Stress relief.
- Preparation for the physical demands of labour.
- Faster recuperation after labour.
- Faster return to pre-pregnancy fitness and healthy weight.
- Increased ability to cope with physical demands of motherhood.

Bodily Changes Associated with Pregnancy

Pregnancy affects the way your body copes or responds to exercise, including:

- Hormones such as relaxin soften ligaments, which could increase your risk of joint injuries (for example, sprains).
- Your growing belly will push your centre of gravity forwards, affecting your balance.
- The average weight gain during pregnancy is 10 to 15kg, and this extra weight puts greater strain on your joints and muscles.
- Pregnancy boosts your resting heart rate; so pre-pregnancy heart rate targets during exercise are no longer reliable.
- Your blood pressure drops in the second trimester, so it is important to avoid activities that involve fast changes of position.
- Your growing baby needs oxygen, so never exercise to the point of breathlessness.

Suggested Activities

Activities and exercises that are recommended:

- Exercise in water (aquarobics)
- Walking
- Swimming
- Yoga
- Stretching
- Dancing
- Cycling on a stationary bicycle
- Pregnancy exercise classes.

Some general guidelines include:

- Aim for four exercise sessions per week.
- Don't try to exercise too far beyond your current fitness level.
- Warm up thoroughly for at least 10 minutes.
- Exercise on soft surfaces, such as grass or carpet.
- Maintain a moderate intensity - a general rule of thumb is to keep your heart rate below 140 beats per minute.
- If exercising in water, keep your heart rate below 125 beats per minute.
- Do no more than 20 minutes of vigorous activity per exercise session, and keep an eye on your heart rate.
- Rest frequently, especially if you are feeling breathless.
- Don't hold your breath - as a rule, breathe out through the movements that need the most effort.
- Change positions carefully and slowly.
- Drink plenty of water before, during and after exercise.
- Cool down thoroughly for at least 10 minutes.
- Include stretching in your exercise program - aim for slow, sustained stretches and avoid 'bouncing'.
- Monitor your body temperature - if you are feeling too hot slow down your activity and take in some water.
- Wear multiple layers of clothing that you can remove, rather than one bulky layer. Choose natural fibres such as cotton.
- Wear a supportive bra.
- Have at least two rest days every week.



Exercises to Avoid

- Competition cycling, rollerblading or vigorous stretching.
- Contact sports, trampolining or activities that carry a risk of falling.
- Competition sports, depending on the stage of pregnancy, the level of competition and your level of fitness.
- After about the fourth month, exercises that involve lying on your back - the weight of your baby can compress your main artery. This will lower your blood pressure and make you feel dizzy and light-headed.
- In the later stages of pregnancy, activities that involve jolting or jarring the body, such as running and jumping, or that demand rapid changes of direction.

The level of exertion will depend on your level of fitness but even fit athletes should only exercise at moderate levels of intensity.

General Cautions

Be guided by your doctor or physiotherapist, but general cautions include:

- Avoid raising your body temperature too high - for example, don't soak in hot spas or exercise to the point of heavy sweating.
- Reduce your level of exercise on hot or humid days.
- If weight training, choose low weights and medium to high repetitions - avoid lifting heavy weights altogether.
- Don't exercise if you are ill or feverish.
- If you don't feel like exercising on a particular day - then don't! It is important to listen to your body to avoid unnecessarily depleting your energy reserves.

Pelvic Floor Exercises

The pelvic floor muscles are tightly slung between the tailbone (coccyx) and the pubic bone, and support the bladder, uterus, vagina and bowel. Weak pelvic floor muscles can't adequately support these organs, which could cause problems including incontinence and prolapsed uterus.

The weight of the growing baby puts excessive strain on the pelvic floor muscles, but you can perform simple exercises to help avoid future problems. Urethral muscles are those that stop urine in mid-flow, and the anal sphincter is responsible for 'holding on' when you need to pass a bowel motion. You can feel the muscles around your

vagina by inserting a finger and squeezing or practice stopping your urine mid-flow.

Pelvic floor exercises include:

- Squeeze your muscles slowly and hold for up to 10 seconds. Repeat 10 times.
- Perform quick, strong squeezes. Repeat 10 times.
- Squeeze the muscles whenever you sneeze, cough or clear your throat.

Abdominal Exercises

Strong abdominal muscles support your spine. It is important to keep your abdominal muscles strong, particularly during the third trimester when the size and weight of your baby are rapidly increasing. Suggestions include:

- Concentrate on drawing your belly button towards your spine.
- Breathe out while pulling in your belly.
- Hold the position and count to 10. Relax, and breathe in.
- Repeat 10 times, as many times per day as you are capable.

You can perform this exercise sitting, standing, or on your hands and knees. Consider doing your abdominal exercises and pelvic floor exercises at the same time. Avoid conventional 'crunches' or sit-ups that involve lying on your back and drawing your ribcage and pelvis together.

Back Exercises

- Stand with your feet comfortably apart, bend your knees slightly and place your hands on your hips. Rotate your pelvis clockwise as in belly dancing. Repeat in an anticlockwise direction.
- Next imagine your pelvis is a basin and tip it slowly backwards and forwards.
- Next repeat this pelvic tilting movement whilst on hands and knees.
- Also on hands and knees stretch your back upwards - the cat stretch.

Deciding Against Exercise

You may decide against exercise during your pregnancy. Perhaps you are experiencing severe and sustained morning sickness or you may have other problems (such as heart disease, pre-eclampsia or increased risk of premature labour) that require bed rest. Under these circumstances you may need to consider only breathing, leg and arm exercises. You will also need to eat less than you usually do to compensate for the inactivity.