

Exercise During Pregnancy

What are the benefits of exercise during pregnancy?

Childbirth is one of the most physically stressful challenges a woman ever faces. Regular exercise during pregnancy can help because it:

- Strengthens muscles, bones, and ligaments needed for labor and delivery
- Helps reduce backaches, constipation, bloating, and swelling
- Improves posture
- Gives you more energy and helps you feel better
- Helps you sleep better
- May help keep you from becoming diabetic during pregnancy

When should I start exercising?

Regular exercise is a very important part of a healthy lifestyle. If you are thinking about getting pregnant and have not been exercising most days of the week, now is a good time to start. The sooner you start exercising, the better you will feel during and after your pregnancy.

Many healthcare providers recommend exercising at least 30 minutes a day, 3 to 7 days a week, if you have no medical problems or problems with the pregnancy. Before you start an exercise program, discuss it with your healthcare provider. Make sure you follow your provider's advice.

A big mistake many women make is not starting an exercise program until the last 3 months of pregnancy, when they start childbirth classes. Some exercise can be harder to do during the last 3 months because of the changes in your body. Your uterus and breasts are bigger and may change your center of gravity. This can affect your balance and make it easier for you to fall. Also, hormonal changes make your joints looser. This makes it easier to develop muscle spasms and hurt yourself. Also, if you have not been exercising regularly until late in pregnancy, even moderate exercise may decrease how much oxygen your baby gets. Simple walking may be the best exercise at this time.

If you are having certain problems with your pregnancy, you should not exercise. Exercise can change how much oxygen your baby gets. Even light exercise might hurt a baby that already has problems with getting enough oxygen. It's especially important to not start an exercise program before talking to your healthcare provider if you:

- Have high blood pressure
- Have anemia (a low red blood cell count)
- Have a lung problem such as asthma or bronchitis
- Are a smoker
- Are very overweight or obese
- Have diabetes that is not well controlled

- Have a pregnancy problem, such as high blood pressure or early labor
- Have any other medical illness and are not sure if you should exercise

Which muscles are the most important ones to strengthen with exercise?

In addition to your heart, the muscles that you should concentrate on during pregnancy are the muscles of your abdomen, back, and pelvis.

- Strengthening the muscles in your belly will make it easier to support the increasing weight of your baby. You will also be able to push with more strength when you deliver your baby.
- Strengthening back muscles and doing exercises to improve your posture will reduce the strain of pregnancy on your lower back. It will help prevent discomfort caused by poor posture.
- Strengthening pelvic muscles will allow your vagina to widen more easily during childbirth. This will help prevent urinary problems (leaking urine when you cough or sneeze) after delivery.

What kinds of exercise can I do?

Many old ideas about strenuous exercise during pregnancy have been disproved in recent years. What kinds of sports and exercise you do during pregnancy depends on your health and on what you were doing before you got pregnant. Pregnancy is probably not a good time to take up a new strenuous sport. However, if you were active before you were pregnant you can probably keep doing your usual exercise, within reason.

- **Walking:** If you did not do any exercise before getting pregnant, walking is a good way to start an exercise program.
- **Tennis:** If you are an active tennis player, you can probably keep playing unless you have special problems or feel unusually tired. Just be aware of your change in balance and how it affects quick movements.
- **Jogging:** If you jog, you may be able to keep jogging as long as you feel comfortable doing it. Avoid getting overheated, and stop if you feel uncomfortable or tired. Remember to drink plenty of water.
- **Swimming:** Swimming is good way to exercise during pregnancy. The water supports your weight while you tone and strengthen many muscles. Scuba diving is not advised because of the risk of decompression sickness and oxygen problems for the baby.
- **Golf and bowling:** Both of these sports are good forms of recreation. You will just have to adjust to your bigger belly. Be careful not to lose your balance.
- **Snow skiing, water skiing, surfing, and horseback riding:** These sports can be dangerous because you can hit the ground or water hard. Falling while traveling at fast speeds could hurt your baby. Talk to your healthcare provider before you do any of these activities while you are pregnant.
- **Climbing, hiking, and skiing above 10,000 feet:** Elevations above 10,000 feet can keep you and your baby from getting enough oxygen. Avoid strenuous

exercise at this altitude, especially if you normally live close to sea level. Walking or swimming may be OK but do not do exercises that make you short of breath or give you muscle cramps.

- Kegel exercises: Kegel exercises help strengthen your pelvic muscles and prepare them for childbirth. Your healthcare provider can tell you how to do these exercises.
- Yoga: Yoga exercises can help increase your flexibility and strengthen your muscles for labor and delivery.

What are the guidelines for exercising during pregnancy?

- It's important to warm up and cool down for 5 to 10 minutes before and after exercise. Start your physical activity slowly and build up to more demanding exercises. Toward the end of an exercise session, slow down your activity.
- A good exercise goal is at least 2 hours and 30 minutes (150 minutes) a week of moderate exercise. Moderate exercise means you're working hard enough to raise your heart rate and break a sweat. Examples of moderate exercise are walking fast, doing water aerobics, or playing doubles tennis. Try to exercise for at least 10 minutes at a time and spread your total workout time over the week. That means you might do 30-minute workouts, 5 times a week.
- Check your pulse. Slow down if your heart starts beating faster than the target range recommended by your healthcare provider. Exercise that is too strenuous may speed up the baby's heartbeat to a dangerous level. In general, if you are able to carry on a conversation comfortably while exercising, your heart rate is probably OK.
- Don't try to do too much. Remember that the extra weight you are carrying will make you work harder as you exercise. Stop right away if you feel tired, short of breath, or dizzy.
- Drink water often before, during, and after exercise to prevent dehydration. Take a break in your workout to drink more water if needed.
- Don't do sports or exercise that might cause you to fall or be bumped.
- Be very careful with your back. Avoid positions and exercises that increase the bend in your back. They put extra stress on the stretched abdominal muscles and might hurt your spine. Deep knee bends, full sit-ups, double leg raises, and straight-leg toe touches also may hurt the tissues that connect your back joints and legs.
- After the first trimester don't do exercises while you are lying on your back because it decreases the oxygen your baby gets from your blood.
- Your exercise program may need to change somewhat after 20 weeks of pregnancy because of your large stomach and possible problems with balance.
- Do not get overheated. Avoid outdoor exercise in hot, humid weather. Also avoid hot tubs, whirlpools, or saunas. Getting overheated during pregnancy increases the baby's temperature. If the baby's temperature gets too high, it can affect the cells developing in the baby's nervous system and brain.
- Don't exercise on or around slippery or wet areas, snow, or ice.
- Don't exercise if you have an illness with a temperature over 100°F (37.8°C).

- Avoid the jerky, bouncy, or high-impact motions and jarring or quick changes in direction that can happen when you play contact sports, jump rope, or jump on a trampoline. These motions may cause back, abdominal, pelvic, and leg pain. They could also cause you to lose your balance.
- Wear a well-fit and supportive bra.
- Make exercise a part of your daily life. Daily tasks can double as exercise sessions if you do the following:
 - Tighten your abdominal muscles when you are standing or sitting.
 - Squat when you lift anything, whether it is light or heavy.
 - Move your feet and ankles in circles anytime your feet are elevated.
 - Check your posture each time you pass a mirror.

When should I stop exercising?

Stop exercising and call your healthcare provider if you have any unusual symptoms, such as:

- Pain, including pelvic pain, uterine contractions, or chest pain
- Trouble walking
- Bleeding or fluid leaking from the vagina
- Faintness or dizziness
- An increase in shortness of breath
- Muscle weakness
- Pain in the calf of your leg
- Headaches when you exercise
- Irregular heartbeat (skipped beats or very rapid beats).

Also tell your healthcare provider if the baby is moving less during or after exercise

Remember that it is very important to discuss your plans for exercise with your provider. If you are having problems with your pregnancy, exercise is not advised. Talk to your provider if you have any questions.

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