

Exercise during pregnancy.

Let's move baby!

Pregnancy might seem like the perfect time to sit back and relax. Exercising during your pregnancy can help build the stamina that is required for labour and delivery. Exercise can also help stabilise your overall weight, as being seriously overweight or underweight can influence birth defects like cleft palate and diabetes. During pregnancy you are likely feel more tired than usual especially during the first and third trimesters, and your back might ache from carrying extra weight, but unless you're experiencing complications, sitting around won't help - let's move baby!

Pregnancy can be a great time to get active — even if you haven't exercised in a while. It is exceptionally important to listen to your body throughout and to stop if you experience pain, bleeding or dizziness - although ensuring that you never exert yourself to this level is the key. Exercise should feel of moderate intensity. You should feel that you can talk comfortably whilst exercising, yet also feel like you have a slightly elevated heart rate. You can tell your heart rate is elevated when you have a light sweat on and are slightly puffed.

You should never feel red in the face, very sweaty and as if you can't talk. If so, you need to lower the intensity. Walking regularly, swimming, pre-natal aqua, yoga and Pilates classes are all good exercise options, as well as lightweight training. Contact and extreme sports must be avoided for obvious reasons! Women who have been very fit prior to pregnancy are able to continue their training as usual in the first trimester but should tailor it to be more moderate for your 2nd and 3rd trimesters. Ensuring that you are well hydrated so that your core temperature stays comfortable, is extremely important and it is advisable not to exercise in very hot climates.

Making sure that you have eaten a small amount prior to exercising is also paramount, so that your blood sugar stays balanced and you have adequate energy for the chosen exercise, this will ensure you and your baby have enough nutrients to maintain overall health.

So, why exercise during pregnancy?

During pregnancy, exercise may help reduce backache, constipation (groan!), bloating and odema (swelling). It may help boost your mood and energy levels (think of all the happy endorphins rushing through your body), help you sleep better (bliss), may help prevent excess weight gain, can promote muscle tone, it will also help you prepare for the physical demands of labour, due to increased stamina and cardiovascular endurance as well as the strength that is required from the pelvic floor muscles and quadriceps. Labour can be like an endurance event, so it makes sense to train for it! Other possible benefits of following a regular exercise program during pregnancy may include: lowering your risk of gestational diabetes, shortened labor and reduced the likelihood of having a C-section.

Before you begin any exercise, it may pay to have a chat with your LMC or health care provider, although exercise during pregnancy is generally good for you and your baby, they may advise you not to exercise if you have any previous or pregnancy related health conditions that may deem exercise unsafe.

Do not exercise if you feel you are unwell or if you feel you are coming down with something. While you are pregnant your immune system is slightly lower than a non-pregnant woman's, making you more susceptible to illness, take care of yourself first, you can start again when you are feeling well.

Walking is a great exercise for beginners. It provides moderate aerobic conditioning with minimal stress on your joints. Strength training is OK, too, as long as you stick to relatively low weights. Remember to warm up, stretch and cool down. Drink plenty of fluids to stay hydrated, and be careful to avoid overheating. Intense exercise increases oxygen and blood flow to the muscles and away from your uterus.

Depending on your fitness level, consider these recommended guidelines: If you haven't exercised for a while. Begin with as little as 10 minutes of physical activity a day. Build up to 15 minutes, 20 minutes, and so on, until you reach at least 30 minutes a day which you should be able to comfortably achieve over a week or two. If you exercised before pregnancy, you can probably continue to work out at the same level while you're pregnant — as long as you're feeling comfortable and your health care provider says it's OK.

Activities to approach with care

If you're not sure whether a particular activity is safe during pregnancy, check with your health care provider or LMC. Consider avoiding any exercises that you lie flat on your back after your first trimester, contact sports, such as hockey, soccer, basketball and volleyball etc. Activities that pose a high risk of falling — such as skiing, skating, gymnastics, and horseback riding and activities that could cause you to hit the water with great force, such as water skiing, surfing and diving. Other activities to avoid include exercise at high altitudes or could cause an impact to your abdomen such as kickboxing.

Staying motivated

You're more likely to stick with an exercise plan if it involves activities you enjoy and fits into your daily schedule. Consider these simple tips, start small, you don't need to join a gym or wear expensive workout clothes to get in shape - just get moving. Try a daily walk through your neighborhood or walk the perimeter of the grocery store a few times. Take the stairs instead of the lift at work. Ask your partner or friend to join you, exercise can be more interesting if you use the time to chat. Choose one that fits your interests and schedule. It's important to listen to your body (you are the expert of it, after all!).

Important to note

As important as it is to exercise, it's also important to watch for signs of any problems. Stop exercising and contact your health care provider and/or LMC if you have any chest, abdominal, pelvic pain, or persistent contractions. Develop a headache, notice an absence or decrease in fetal movements. Feel faint, dizzy, nauseous, or light-headed. Feel cold or clammy, have any vaginal bleeding or a sudden gush of fluid from your vagina or a trickle of fluid that leaks steadily. Notice an irregular or rapid heartbeat, have sudden swelling in your ankles, hands, face, or calf pain. Are short of breath, are having difficulty walking or have any muscle weakness.

