

EXERCISE IN PREGNANCY

Pregnancy is a time when your body will undergo many changes. It is physically demanding to carry a baby, and even more so to push one out!

Is exercise safe?

Traditionally women were advised to avoid strenuous aerobic activity during pregnancy. There were concerns of increasing body temperature and of diverting blood flow away from the baby affecting her growth. There are also concerns of muscle injury to the woman due to change in centre of gravity and weight. Recent studies have shown no negative pregnancy outcomes with exercise. It is safe for a healthy mom and baby.

Why exercise?

Exercise is important in maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Avoiding exercise during pregnancy increases the following risks:

- Loss of muscle mass and cardiovascular fitness
- maternal weight gain
- gestational diabetes
- hypertension
- varicose veins
- deep vein thrombosis

Exercise is also important in helping to manage stress as pregnancy can be an emotional and tiring period.

Who should exercise?

All women with uncomplicated pregnancies should participate in aerobic and strength-training exercises. Women with complications in pregnancy such as persistent bleeding, or high-risk pregnancies such as multiples, should speak with their doctor before engaging in any type of exercise.

How much exercise is recommended?

For women who were previously active, they may continue with their usual regimen. For women previously sedentary, they should begin with 15 minutes of continual exercise 3 times a week, increasing to 30 minutes 4 times a week. The best time to start is usually in the second trimester when nausea resolves and fatigue improves. Generally, exercising at an intensity where you can still “talk” is appropriate. Elite athletes should speak with their doctor about continuing training.

What kind of exercise?

Safety first! Exercise that minimizes the risk of falling or trauma is best. Walking, stationary cycling, and swimming are some activities that are good aerobic exercise with less stress on joints.

Stop exercising if you experience lightheadedness, shortness of breath, chest pain, uterine contractions, vaginal bleeding, or rupture of membranes and seek medical attention.

Are there certain exercises that should be avoided?

Women should take caution in activities like horseback riding, downhill skiing, and cycling which can lead to falls and fetal trauma. Hot yoga should not be performed during pregnancy as the high temperatures can cause maternal hyperthermia and lead to neural tube defects in the first trimester. Scuba diving, also should absolutely be avoided. Women should be careful about exercising at high altitudes.

Any activity involving lying on your back should also be avoided after 16 weeks gestation as this may compromise blood return causing lightheadedness.

What about exercise after pregnancy?

Depending on the type of delivery, most exercise can be continued. Let your body be your guide. If you have had a caesarean section, exercise should be delayed to allow wound healing. Talk to your doctor if you are uncertain or experiencing discomfort.

“Kegel” exercises are important to return strength to the pelvic floor muscles and prevent urine leaking when laughing, sneezing, or lifting. Ask your doctor if you are unsure of how to do them.

What about exercise and breastfeeding?

Exercise does not reduce the nutritional content of breast milk. At maximal intensity of exercise, there can be increased lactic acid which infants may note as a change in taste of the breast milk. If your baby seems to dislike the milk after exercise, try pumping before exercise or breastfeeding at least one hour after exercise.

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References:

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2. Chan J, Natekar A, Koren G. Hot yoga and pregnancy: fitness and hyperthermia. Can Fam Physician 2014 Jan; 60(1): 41-2.