

Pregnancy and Exercise

One of the most daunting things about pregnancy is how rapidly your body changes in order to accommodate the new life it is creating. Very often the first few signs of pregnancy: missed period, sore breasts, nausea, are met with a feeling of joy and wonder. These feelings are very quickly followed by questions. What now? Where do we go from here? What do I need to do and when? What should I not do?

How can I ensure I am best prepared to bring this child into the world? This is one of the most important questions a woman can ask. Both physically and mentally, exercise can help prepare a women for the demands placed on her by pregnancy and labour. After all, an athlete would not run a marathon without the necessary training, so why would a woman go through pregnancy without preparing her body for labour?



The benefits of exercise in pregnancy do not begin and end with labour, nor are they confined to just mum - the benefits are also passed onto the baby. Recent research has shown that the amount of oxygen flowing to the baby increases, placental function improves and autonomic responses in the baby are enhanced also. These autonomic responses are responsible for lowering the baby's heart rate and breathing once born, along with improving the baby's ability to adapt to stress.

For mum, exercise can help reduce many pregnancy symptoms such as: back ache, constipation, swelling and bloating. Also, it can help control weight gain, improve moods, reduce stress levels, promote muscle tone, increase strength and, most importantly, endurance. Posture, prevention of leg cramps and aiding better sleep are also benefits. Women who exercise regularly during their pregnancy maintain positive attitudes about themselves and their pregnancies, along with their approaching labour and deliveries.

So what are the guidelines to exercising safely while pregnant?

A lot of women are already very active prior to pregnancy and, for these women, it is safe to continue as they are, with the exception of contact or impact sports, e.g. rugby, tennis and martial arts. For women who are not active prior to pregnancy, but want to prepare their bodies for this journey, it is recommended that they wait until their 2nd trimester to start exercising.

2nd Trimester

Once they have reached their second trimester, the guidelines are as follows:

30-60 minutes of exercise, three times a week at a moderate intensity, building this up to four / five times a week. For previously exercising women, it is recommended that they exercise up to five times a week.

3rd Trimester

It is recommended to keep up the frequency, but lower the intensity. At all times you should be comfortable and be able to hold a conversation.

As with any condition, there are always contraindications for exercise. Those listed below should not be ignored and women with any of the following should seek medical attention prior to exercising:

Vaginal Bleeding	Dizziness	Chest pain
Muscle weakness	Decreased foetal movement	Calf swelling
Preterm Labour	Calf pain	Amniotic fluid leakage
Visual Disturbance	Heart palpitations	Persistent nausea / vomiting
Pre-eclampsia	Short of breath	Uterine contractions over 15 minutes

Adaptations to pregnancy and exercise

During pregnancy, your body adapts in order to accommodate your growing baby. Hormones are released to initiate relaxation and reduce responsiveness, even at cell level, resulting in the elasticity and volume of the entire circulatory system increasing dramatically. It is this effect which mimics the symptoms of dehydration in early pregnancy, causing nausea, pallor, sudden fatigue, racing pulse, sweating and dizziness, especially on standing too quickly. These symptoms gradually improve towards the end of the 1st trimester as the body's blood volume increases to meet these needs.

Other adaptations include increased blood flow response, allowing pregnant women to lower their temperature more effectively, hence the reason why they sweat more. There is an increase in the size of the heart chambers and thus the volume of blood pumped with each beat increases, meaning the body's ability to deliver oxygen to the tissues is also enhanced.

These five adaptations are very similar to those induced by regular exercise meaning that women, who exercise during pregnancy, improve their ability to deal with both anticipated (exercise, work, labour) and unanticipated stress.

However, there are some precautions to ensure they are exercising safely.

- Always use a qualified instructor, specialising in pre and post natal exercise.
- Ensure you are well hydrated, prior, during and after exercise.
- Avoid gastrointestinal discomfort by eating at least one and a half hours prior to exercise.
- Do not exercise to exhaustion or undue fatigue.
- Modify intensity of exercise according to symptoms and stage of pregnancy.
- Avoid rapid changes in direction and exercises that require extremes of motion.
- Avoid anaerobic pace.
- Include warm ups and cool downs.
- Avoid exercising in hot weather, high humidity or high pollution areas.
- Strenuous exercise should not exceed 30 minutes; 15 – 20 intervals are recommended.
- Avoid exercise that requires you to spend long times on your back (very important once you reach 20 weeks).
- Avoid Valsalva manoeuvres: holding your breath - this can lead to dizziness and fainting.

Today's society makes some of us want, or need, to be the ideal "woman". During pregnancy you cannot conform to these ideals - you lose control of your body – it just does what it needs to do! Some people find this very difficult and alien. Exercising can help you can exert a certain amount of control over your changing body and self perception. It has both a physical and mental impact. Research has shown "...women who continue to perform weight-bearing exercise throughout pregnancy...gain less weight, feel better, have short, less complicated labours and recover more rapidly." (Clapp, 2002)

As you can see, the benefits pregnant women gain from exercising is doubled. Not only does the mum benefit but the baby does too! With these points in mind, it is easy to see that a pregnant lady who exercises regularly is already giving herself and her baby the best start possible!

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