

NSW Sport and Recreation
Active Community Guide

Mum's the Word

Exercise during pregnancy



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Why should I exercise during my pregnancy?

So you've just found out that you're going to have a baby! How is this change of lifestyle going to affect your fitness level? Do you need to exercise? How do you work out correctly and safely for yourself and your baby? What type of exercise can you do? How far into your pregnancy can you exercise? These and many more questions about fitness and pregnancy are often asked by Mums-to-be. So what are some of the answers?

At no point in a woman's life is general fitness more crucial than during pregnancy and childbirth. An informed and realistic fitness program can benefit a pregnant woman in many ways. The health of your heart and blood vessels can be maintained or even improved during pregnancy.

Women can improve muscular strength, which is especially good preparation for carrying a baby.

And by developing your upper body strength and abdominal muscles, you can improve your posture, working to overcome the forward pull of the growing baby's weight. Common disorders often associated with pregnancy, such as lower back pain and leg cramps, can be eased and exercise can help to prevent varicose veins by improving your circulation.

Overall you, as an exercising mother-to-be, will feel better about yourself, be able to control unnecessary weight gain and attain ease of movement and balance. Being fit will help you feel well and relaxed to cope with the demands of labour.

Current evidence shows that it is not only safe but also beneficial to continue physical activity during pregnancy. By attention to some simple guidelines coupled with good medical care, a woman can enjoy her pregnancy exercise program and anticipate similar levels of fitness after childbirth.

So with all these advantages to be gained from exercising during your pregnancy, what are you waiting for? You've only got nine months to enjoy that little person inside you, so why not make the most of it by being as healthy as possible!

Guidelines for maintaining your fitness level during your pregnancy

1. Consult your doctor first:

Discuss your fitness program with your Obstetrician to make sure there are no medical objections. There are certain conditions that may preclude you from exercising during pregnancy. These may include a history of miscarriages, placenta praevia, heart disease, multiple pregnancies, a weak cervix, high blood pressure, obesity, anaemia, diabetes or thyroid disease. If you have a condition that prevents you from exercising, you can still practice breathing and relaxation techniques and pelvic floor exercises.

2. Listen to your body:

Use common sense and trust the messages your body gives out. Listening to your body is paramount as it gives control back to you. The more confidence a woman has in her changing body, the better the decisions she will make regarding it and the growing baby.

3. Work on good posture:

Extra weight and a change in your centre of gravity can make such actions as walking, sitting and lifting difficult during pregnancy, and doing them incorrectly may put extra strain on your abdomen and back. Good posture is important at any time and during pregnancy it becomes even more vital. The hollow, backward leaning stance is one of the most common causes of backache amongst pregnant women. To avoid this, sit and walk tall.

4. Exercise gently:

Exercise at levels appropriate to previous fitness then taper off, at least in the last three months. Pregnancy is not the time to start a new energetic activity, improve athletic performance or engage in competitive sports. Maintaining physical fitness and preparing for labour and delivery need to be the major goals of a prenatal exercise program. Do not start with any vigorous activity if you have not been involved in regular exercise. A gentle walking program is recommended. For fit women, it is suggested

that you try to continue with the same or similar type of exercise without trying to increase the intensity, frequency or duration, and allow for a gradual slowing down as the pregnancy progresses.

5. Exercise for fun:

Avoid the temptation to compete in the 'normal' sense. Be willing to modify your program or stop if you feel you are straining, becoming excessively fatigued or have any of the following symptoms: breathlessness, dizziness, headache, muscle weakness, chest pain or tightness, nausea, back pain or pubic pain. Consult your doctor.

6. Realise that slowing down is normal:

Nausea and fatigue are often the first signs of change and a result of fluctuating hormone levels. Your desire to exercise may decrease while your frustration and anxiety about weight gain may rise. The first trimester is when energy levels may drop, with the same activity level requiring more effort. These symptoms will pass and energy levels will resurge in the second trimester, although not to pre-pregnancy standards.

7. Do not extend your joints beyond their normal range of movement:

Relaxin is the name of a hormone which loosens your joints and connective tissue during pregnancy, allowing the ribs and pelvic region to expand to encompass the growing baby. More flexible joints, however, create greater injury potential. Any movements that over extend the hip, knee, ankle or elbow joints such as sitting cross legged should be eliminated.



8. Always warm up and cool down:

Warming up becomes especially important to avoid injury. During pregnancy, the joints have less synovial fluid (protective fluid), leaving them more susceptible to damage. A long, gentle, progressive warm up, isolating as many muscles as possible, will reduce this risk. At the end of your exercise program, ensure that you do a long, gradual cool down as this will help with the circulation of your blood back to the heart which will consequently return your heart back to its normal resting rate. This cool down should include gentle, stationary stretching. But avoid stretching too far because the effect of relaxin means you could damage your joints.

9. Your exercise clothing must be unrestrictive and comfortable:

It is a good idea to dress in layers that can be removed as you heat up. By doing this you will assist your sweating/cooling process as much as possible. Also wear a bra with added support. Use one that is designed for active women. As breasts enlarge, bouncing movements may become uncomfortable.

10. Strengthen your abdominal muscles and pelvic floor muscles:

The pelvic floor consists of several muscles that extend from the coccyx (tail bone) to the pubic bone. Slung similar to a hammock, these muscles support organs and the pelvis from the downward pull of gravity. Pelvic floor muscle release allows for the passage of the baby during delivery. The mother needs to maintain tone and support in the abdominal and pelvic floor muscles during the pregnancy, and to recover strength and control in these muscles after the birth. Strong abdominal muscles reduce back strain as they help support the spine and the added weight of the baby. The more abdominal strength you can achieve before or early in the pregnancy, the better.

11. Exercise carefully if lying on your back:

This is because pressure from the uterus on the major vein (vena cava) may affect blood flow to the heart. If you do experience symptoms such as dizziness, nausea, shortness of breath, spots before your eyes, tingling fingers, a feeling of suffocating or general discomfort, roll to your side. This will instantly remove the pressure on the vena cava. Also don't forget to eliminate these exercises from your program.

12. Drink water – and plenty of it! And don't Get overheated!

A prolonged increase in body temperature, particularly in the first three months of pregnancy, can harm the foetus, which has no mechanism for cooling itself. Dehydration can interfere with blood circulation and may trigger premature labour. To prevent this from happening, take fluids before, during and after your fitness sessions.

13. Modify your activity program:

Here are some tips to make sure that the exercise you do makes you feel good and is safe. Fluid, easy, range-of-motion exercises and static stretching need to replace any movements such as hopping, twisting, bouncing and running – this is particularly important if you are doing aerobic classes as part of your fitness program. Such movements threaten balance and create potential for injury. Also avoid quick movements that change direction and positions that make it hard for you to keep balance. Avoid bending forward, which is very strenuous for expectant mothers. Always feel comfortable about taking a break or stopping during your workout program, if you think you need a rest.

14. Before you begin your physical activity, empty your bladder:

Also if possible, pick a spot near a bathroom to do your exercise. The combination of increased fluid intake and pressure on the enlarged uterus on the bladder often leads to urinary incontinence.

15. Snack often, eating lighter meals:

Eating a high-carbohydrate snack before exercising will greatly help to raise your energy level. The type of snack you may choose will vary throughout the day. Why not try an apple, a peanut butter sandwich or some pasta? Contrary to belief, sugary foods (although they are a carbohydrate food) are not a good source of energy.

16. Learn to relax:

A pregnant woman tires easily and some rest every day is essential in the later stages of pregnancy. From approximately 34 weeks onward, aim to lie down for 30 minutes to one hour each day, preferably after lunch. If you find it difficult to go to bed during the day, try lying on the floor with pillows for support. Use this time to practice your relaxation skills for labour.

17. Exercising in water is an excellent form of physical activity:

It allows your weight to be supported, you can keep cool and there is no straining or jarring your joints. Also the water gives you a soothing massage and does wonders for your circulation. There are many different types of exercise which you can do in water – why not try an aqua aerobics class, swimming laps, or if you were previously jogging, why not jog in the water! If you choose to swim laps, make sure your program is varied by combining freestyle, breaststroke, sidestroke and then perhaps getting out of the water and walking a lap. As with any other form of exercise, it is essential to do a thorough warm-up and cool down,



particularly to stretch out the muscles of your lower back. When doing breaststroke, especially as your pregnancy progresses, keep the arcs of your arm and leg movements narrow (almost like a dog paddle) to prevent overstretching of your abdominal muscles.

18. And when the baby is born, remember your postnatal exercises:

No doubt you will want to feel healthy and strong again as soon as possible. As in the pre-pregnancy period, the emphasis is on the muscles in the pelvic floor. These muscles must be strengthened in order to regain proper bladder and bowel control, for sexual intercourse and to help prevent prolapse of the uterus (womb) in middle age. After the birth, exercising should be fairly gentle with gradual progression. Take the opportunity to attend the post natal exercise classes held in every hospital immediately after the birth. Following the postnatal check-up six weeks after the birth, it is usually safe for more vigorous exercises to be attempted.

Exercise program

The National Physical Activity Guidelines for Australians recommends that you put together at least 30 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity on most, preferably all, days. Sports Medicine Australia has guidelines that categorise sports according to the level of safety for the pregnant athlete. Non-contact sports (eg swimming, walking) are considered safe throughout pregnancy. Individual fitness programs should be discussed with your obstetrician. As well as maintaining your general fitness, the following exercises performed regularly may be beneficial during pregnancy.

Remember:

- In the following exercises, women have been photographed who are at varying stages of their pregnancy to show that you can exercise all the way through your pregnancy as long as you feel comfortable.
- Be aware of your breathing patterns during these exercises. Don't hold your breath – breathe normally. Monitor your breathing with every exercise.
- The number of repetitions you do of each exercise will depend very much on how you are feeling and what stage of your pregnancy you are at. It is better to do fewer exercises properly and with total awareness than to aim for a high number of exercises. The numbers shown here are a suggestion. 8-12 repetitions are recommended if you are feeling comfortable.
- If you experience any pain or strain, especially from your back, abdomen or pelvic region, either modify the exercise or avoid it altogether.

1. Modified Push Ups:

Starting position: Start in the 'push-up' position with your hands shoulder distance apart. Both knees bent, underneath your hips.

Whilst slowly bending your elbows, lower your upper body over your hands, lowering your chin to the floor. Now slowly straighten your elbows.





2. Pelvic Rotation:

Starting position: stand with your feet comfortably apart. Bend your knees slightly. Place your hands on your hips.

Rotate your pelvis clockwise as in belly dancing. Repeat in an anti-clockwise direction.

3. Pelvic Tilting:

Starting position: stand with your feet comfortably apart. Bend your knees slightly. Place one hand on your abdomen and the other on your lower back.

Imagine your pelvis is a basin and tip it slowly backwards and forwards.

Repeat this exercise regularly whilst in the hands and knees position. This position is particularly good if you have backache.



4. Flex and Stretch:

Starting position: kneel on the floor with your weight equally distributed between your hands and your knees.



Lift and straighten your right arm and left leg. Stretch them away from each other. Keep your arm and leg parallel to the floor in a straight line with your body and look at the floor. Do not arch your back.

Hold. Return to starting position and repeat with left arm and right leg.



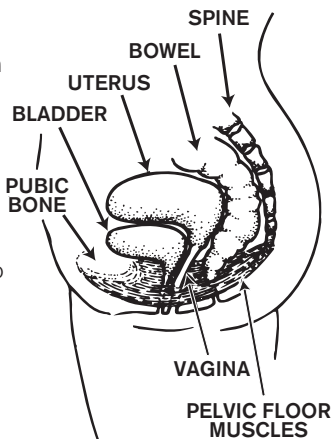
Bend your right elbow and left knee in towards each other. Hold. Repeat with left elbow and right knee.



Return to the starting position. Repeat this exercise 8 times and then do the same with your left arm and right leg. Focus on the mobility in your lower back as your arm and leg move.

5. Pelvic Floor Exercises:

The pelvic floor muscles form a muscular sling under the pelvis running from the pubic bone in front to the spine at the back. They support the pelvic organs such as the bladder, uterus and bowel. These muscles help to control the openings in the pelvic floor for the urethra, vagina and the bowel.



Pelvic Floor Muscle Awareness:

Pelvic floor muscles can be exercised by squeezing the muscles around your anus (back passage) as if you were trying to stop wind.

Then squeezing the muscles around your vagina (front passage) as if you were trying to stop urine.

You should feel your muscles squeeze and lift.

Now tighten your muscles around your vagina and anus together. Hold each contraction for 3-4 seconds and rest for 10 seconds before the next exercise.





These exercises can be done in any position. The positions shown (sitting cross legged and sitting on the edge of the chair) are two examples of positions in which pelvic floor muscles can be exercised.

6. Leg Exercises:

Starting position: stand with your feet a little more than hip distance apart and turned out. Raise your arms out to your sides. Support yourself by holding onto a wall or chair if necessary.

Bend your knees to a quarter squat then straighten them.



7. Shoulder Exercises:

Starting position: stand relaxed with your feet a little more than hip distance apart and your arms comfortably by your side.

Pull your shoulder blades back and down. Hold for 3-5 seconds and relax. Rest for 10 seconds before the next repetition.



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