



Healthy Pregnancy

Exercise in pregnancy

Exercise is one of the best things you can do for your overall health, and pregnancy doesn't change this for most women. Regular, moderate exercise during pregnancy can relieve backache, help prevent constipation, varicose veins and pregnancy-induced diabetes, strengthen muscles needed for delivery, boost your energy, and leave you in better shape after the baby is born. Some women even report that exercise helps minimize their nausea. Every woman should check with her obstetrician before doing any exercise, but women have been active throughout pregnancy for centuries, and most likely you can be, too.

Choosing the right activity

If you were exercising before pregnancy, your goal should be to maintain your exercise program, but with a few changes. Some experts recommend reducing your exercise to 70 to 80% of your pre-pregnancy level. You should talk with your clinician and then do what feels most comfortable for you. If you never exercised before pregnancy, you should start slowly and gradually build up. Good activities to choose during pregnancy are brisk walking or hiking, swimming, stationary cycling, walking a treadmill, prenatal yoga, or exercise classes designed for pregnant women. Harvard Pilgrim offers pregnancy-related exercise classes; our Web site has a complete list. You may find that varying your activity helps keep you motivated throughout your pregnancy and beyond.

When choosing an activity, avoid anything that puts you at high risk for injury, such as horseback riding or downhill skiing. Avoid contact sports in which you could get hit in the stomach, such as hockey, kickboxing or soccer. Especially after the third month, you should avoid exercises that require you to be flat on your back, because this can restrict blood flow to the uterus, which could hurt the baby. Pregnant women should never scuba dive, because dangerous gas bubbles could form in the baby's circulatory system.

How much should you exercise?

The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists recommends that, unless there are medical reasons to avoid it, pregnant women should try to exercise moderately for at least 30 minutes on all or most days. Avoid spurts of intense exercise followed by long periods of inactivity. Always begin with 5 minutes of slow walking or cycling to warm up your muscles. Intense exercise shouldn't last longer than 15 minutes. Follow this with 5-10 minutes of gradually slower activity that ends with gentle stretching in place. When you stretch, do it gently. During pregnancy your body produces a hormone called relaxin, which makes your joints and muscles extra flexible. It allows for expansion of the uterus and repositioning of the pelvic floor, but it's easier for you to strain muscles and ligaments as a result of this new flexibility. Don't exhaust yourself – if you're too out of breath to talk while you're exercising, you're probably exercising too hard. Measure your heart rate when you're exercising the hardest – it shouldn't exceed 140 beats/minute.

Remember that, when you are pregnant, there is less oxygen available for aerobic exercise. Be aware of your body's signals, and slow down or cut back if you need to. You may find that you tire easily, even if you exercised regularly before you were pregnant. Added blood volume, extra weight and a shifting center of gravity all make exercise harder for pregnant women. If you have any questions about how you're feeling when you exercise, or whether it's right for you, talk to your obstetric clinician.

Exercise and heart rate

Your heart rate is higher during pregnancy, so you don't have to exercise as vigorously to reach your target heart rate range. Check your pulse fairly often when you exercise – if it's higher than 140 beats per minute, slow down but don't stop completely. If it's low and you are not out of breath, you can pick up the pace a little, but check your pulse again in a few minutes to make sure you're not overdoing it. Your pulse rate can increase very quickly during a pregnancy workout, and you don't want to go above 140 beats/minute. Your baby's heart rate also increases somewhat during exercise, but it stays within the normal fetal range of 120 to 160 beats a minute.

How to measure your heart rate

When you're pregnant, your heart rate (or pulse rate) shouldn't exceed 140 beats a minute for more than 15 minutes. To measure it, follow these steps:

- Look at a clock or watch with a second hand.
- Put the middle and index fingers of one hand on the side of your neck where you can feel a pulse.
- Once you feel it, wait until the second hand reaches 12. Then count the pulse beats until the second hand reaches 2 (10 seconds).
- Multiply that number by 6 to find your heart rate.

Dos and don'ts of exercising

Exercise contributes to overall good health, but there are some general guidelines to follow when you're pregnant:

- Check with your obstetrician before starting or changing an exercise program.
- Drink plenty of water, or water with electrolytes, when you are exercising and afterwards.
- Monitor your heart rate and breathing. Check your pulse every 10 minutes or so and be sure it doesn't go above 140 beats/minute.
- Wear loose-fitting, lightweight clothing that allows heat to escape and moisture to evaporate. Wear supportive, comfortable shoes (your feet may swell, especially later in pregnancy, or even go up half a size), and a good bra, preferably a sports bra.
- Eat enough. A woman of normal weight needs to eat between 300 and 800 extra calories while she's pregnant, and exercising may increase your needs by burning calories faster.
- Use exercise in pregnancy to maintain fitness, not to push to the next level of training.
- Listen to your body. Your energy and stamina will decrease as your pregnancy goes on. If something doesn't feel right, don't do it.
- Don't exercise in hot, humid environments or when you have a fever. Your temperature affects the baby, and neither of you should get overheated.

- Don't exercise at high altitudes (which the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists defines as higher than 6,000 feet) if your body is unaccustomed to this environment.
- Don't lie on your back after the first trimester. This reduces blood flow to the baby, which can be dangerous.
- Don't use jerky, bouncy, or high-impact motions. Also avoid activities that could cause you to lose your balance.
- Don't exercise too strenuously. Don't wait until you're exhausted—quit when you're tired.

Stop exercising immediately and let your clinician know if you experience any of these symptoms:

- dizziness
- faintness
- shortness of breath
- vaginal bleeding or fluid leaking
- uterine contractions or abdominal pain
- heart palpitations

Who shouldn't exercise

Talk with your clinician about exercise at your first prenatal visit. Later, if you decide to start or change an exercise program, talk to your clinician again. Some women shouldn't exercise during pregnancy, including women with:

- a history of repeated miscarriages, early labor or incompetent cervix
- high blood pressure early in pregnancy
- multiple fetuses
- diagnosed heart disease
- pre-eclampsia
- vaginal bleeding

Kegel exercises

Kegels involve tightening and relaxing the muscles of the pelvic floor. They can help tone the muscles in the vagina and perineum in preparation for delivery. Doing Kegels can also help the vagina regain shape and muscle tone more quickly after birth and may help prevent urinary and bowel incontinence that can develop later in life as a result of the weight of the pregnant uterus stretching out the pelvic floor.

Kegels are easiest to do sitting down, but once you get comfortable with them, you can do them while you're standing or walking. Tighten the muscles around your vagina, as if you were stopping the flow of urine. Hold for as long as you can without straining. Relax, and repeat 25 or more times a day.

After the baby is born

You should be able to start exercising again 4 to 6 weeks after a vaginal birth or 6 to 8 weeks after a cesarean. Check with your doctor first. Kegels can be done immediately after birth or as soon as you feel comfortable.

In many cases, you can bring your baby along to exercise. “Mom and Me” exercise classes are offered at local hospitals and YMCAs, and babysitting is available at many YMCAs, community centers, and health clubs. For a list of health club discounts for Harvard Pilgrim members, click on *Member Savings* at www.harvardpilgrim.org.

For more information

- www.harvardpilgrim.org/pregnancy
- March of Dimes www.marchofdimes.com
- You can also speak confidentially to a Harvard Pilgrim maternal and child health nurse about any pregnancy questions you have: (800) 742-2423