

Pregnancy and exercise

Exercise during Pregnancy

Recommendations suggest that, in the absence of medical or obstetric complications, exercise should be encouraged during pregnancy (1). Safe, appropriate exercise has minimal risks and many confirmed benefits for most women (3).

How does exercise benefit the pregnant woman?

Exercise during pregnancy has many confirmed benefits for both mum and baby (5), so long as the exercise is appropriate for each stage of pregnancy.

These include:

- Helps to maintain cardiovascular fitness and physical conditioning required for labour and motherhood
- Reduces the risk of gestational obesity, diabetes and associated complications
- Reduces the risk of pregnancy-induced hypertension and pre-eclampsia
- Prevents and alleviates musculoskeletal conditions such as back and pelvic pain
- Prevents and alleviates many pregnancy ailments such as fatigue and constipation
- Enhances mental well-being, self-esteem and body image
- Promotes faster recovery from labour and birth

When should exercise be avoided during pregnancy?

For some pregnant women, there may be times when exercise and physical activity may not be appropriate (2) or may need to be modified and/or supervised.

It is important to be aware of these contraindications to exercise:

- Hypertension or pre-eclampsia
- Premature rupture of the membranes, an incompetent cervix
- Placenta Previa
- Persistent second- or third-trimester bleeding
- Uncontrolled diabetes
- Breech position in the third trimester

What are the signs and symptoms to stop exercising?

Always seek advice from a doctor or midwife in the case of the following (1):

- Vaginal bleeding or fluid loss
- Shortness of breath, dizziness, feeling faint or headaches
- Muscles weakness
- Pain in the lower back, pelvic/pubis area or abdomen (potentially indicating preterm labour)



Evidence-based practical guidelines for exercise during pregnancy

Pregnancy is a time of great change – both physically and physiologically. Therefore, additional care and consideration are required when participating in exercise. Recommendations suggest that, in the absence of complications, 30 minutes or more of moderate exercise on most days of the week should be the targets during pregnancy(1).

Recommendations for safe and effective exercise:

- Avoid activities that increase the risk of falls or physical injury such as horse riding, jumping, contact sports (1) or scuba diving (3)
- Perform a gradual and prolonged warm-up and cool down of 5-10 minutes each (3)
- Exercise intensity should feel comfortable and perceived as not more than “somewhat hard” or a rating of 12-14 on the Borg RPE scale (3), or use the ‘talk test’
- Keep core temperature moderate, avoid becoming overheated (4)
- Submaximal resistance training is safe (4), do avoid heavy lifting because it may increase blood pressure, stress pelvic floor and lax joints and compromise posture
- Avoid overhead exercises if unable to maintain neutral spine, alternatively transfer the exercise to a seated or incline position for additional postural support
- Avoid exercises that require you to lie flat on your back after 16 weeks, alternatively use an incline bench or fitness ball where appropriate
- Avoid abdominal exercises if diastasis recti develops (abdominal separation)
- Include core stability, pelvic floor and labour-specific exercises into the program
- Stretching should be slow, controlled and within comfortable range-of-movement (4)
- Ensure adequate hydration, calorie-consumption and sleep (4)

References and further information

Exercise is Medicine Australia www.exerciseismedicine.org.au

Find an Accredited Exercise Physiologist www.essa.org.au

Exercise Right www.exerciseright.com.au

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