

Exercise during Pregnancy & First Weeks Postpartum

Is it safe to exercise in pregnancy?

Regular exercise during pregnancy has many benefits:

- Strengthens muscles needed for labor and delivery
- Decreases constipation by increasing intestinal activity
- Helps reduce backaches and improves posture
- Reduces strain on loose joints caused by pregnancy hormones
- Helps avoid unnecessary weight gain
- Gives you energy and relieves stress and anxiety
- Helps you sleep better and feel less tired
- Helps you look better by increasing blood flow to your skin
- Gives you strong muscles and a healthy heart to help you endure labor and cope better with pain
- Helps lower blood sugar
- Reduces swelling and varicose veins
- Lowers blood pressure and reduces the risk of preeclampsia



When should I start exercising?

The best preparation for pregnancy is to be exercising and in good shape before you become pregnant. However, if you were not exercising before pregnancy, research shows that women can increase their fitness level during pregnancy with an appropriate, safe, consistent movement routine. This means your body builds strength for a growing fetus, birth, and carrying a growing child! As with anything new, you should start slow and simple, building up gradually. If you have questions, seek a movement expert to help you during pregnancy and postpartum.

In the first trimester of pregnancy, many women do not feel like exercising or are unable to exercise because of the nausea and vomiting they are experiencing. Always listen to your body but research has shown movement to help lessen or alleviate symptoms of morning sickness. As soon as this phase has passed, exercise should begin/continue. Exercise is most helpful if it begins early in pregnancy.

A general rule of thumb is that your body can tolerate what it is already accustomed to. If you were already lifting 3 days a week or running five miles a day, you can continue to do so as long as you taper and modify as pregnancy progresses. Be sure to wear loose clothing and a bra that fits you well to provide good support during exercise and shoes with good arch and ankle support. Take care not to become dehydrated or overheated during your exercise.



What are the guidelines for movement in pregnancy?

The most important rule during exercise is to listen to your body. If you are sick or exhausted, don't exercise. If you become short of breath (unable to talk), your heart is racing, you feel dizzy or excessively tired or have pain in your back and pelvis, follow your body's signals and stop. Avoid exercising during the hottest hours of the day or in hot, humid weather. Carry a water bottle and be sure you are drinking during exercise. Don't let yourself become over-heated as this can be dangerous to your baby.

- Avoid exercises that cause you to lose your balance and fall.
- Do not participate in any sport in which there is a possibility of a hard blow to your uterus (such as martial arts or box jumps).
- Do not exercise until you are completely winded or exhausted. A good rule for aerobic work/cardio is the “talk test”. A great work zone during pregnancy is speaking 2-3 words before you have to take a breath.
- Remember that the extra weight you are carrying will cause you to tire more quickly.
- If you are exercising regularly, you should be consuming 400+ calories per day to maintain a healthy weight gain for your pregnancy.

If you have any of the following, stop exercising immediately and seek medical help:

- Severe pain
- Vaginal bleeding
- Dizziness or lightheadedness
- Unusual shortness of breath
- Chest pain or racing heart
- Fluid leaking from your vagina
- Uterine contractions which do not stop with rest and hydration
- Calf pain or swelling
- Decreased fetal movement
- Headache



Remember that during pregnancy your ligaments are looser due to the hormone Relaxin. The main purpose of this hormone is to relax the ligaments of your pelvis to allow your baby to be birthed. This loosening can also put you at more risk for injury. Take caution when performing complex movements like Olympic lifts, yoga, running, and plyometrics.

Always begin your chosen exercise with a 5-10 minute warm-up of light activity and end with a 5-10 minute cool-down in which you gradually slow down and stretch. Stretching daily in the afternoon/evening will help you avoid soreness and stiffness. The healthiest routine is to exercise 3-4 times per week. Try not to skip your exercises for long periods of time and then try to make up for lost time by exercising excessively.

Which muscle groups are most important to exercise?

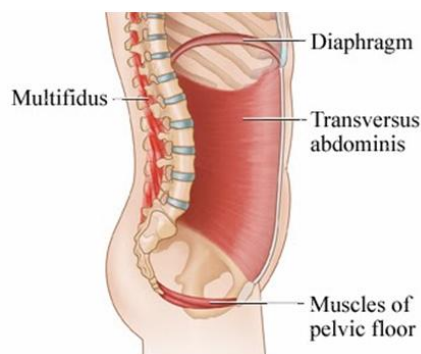
All of them! Full body movement is key to all muscles and ligaments working properly and in conjunction with each other. A well programmed strength training routine will challenge the entire body appropriately, effectively, and in 20-45 minutes to give you lasting benefit.

After a weight lifting session, your body continues to consume fuel/burn fat for up to 48 hours because it's repairing the micro tears to muscles and building new. Your body only consumes fuel/burns fat DURING an aerobic/cardio session (elliptical, running, treadmill), which is extremely limiting, less effective, and potentially detrimental long term when strength training is not included. That's not to say we shouldn't work aerobically, there are simply better ways to do it than 90 minutes on a cardio machine. Try sprint training, swinging a kettlebell, battling ropes, Olympic lifts (with dumbbells in 2nd/3rd trimesters), jump ropes, agility ladders, boxing, swimming.

What about abs?!

As your baby grows, your abdominals become stretched. Performing excessive flexion movements, movements where you bring your torso upright (sit ups) or legs up (hanging leg raise) will put you at increased risk for diastasis recti or splitting of abdominals down the middle called the linea alba.

Your entire core structure works in balance with your pelvic floor and diaphragm. A well-rounded movement program will work these structures in unison and in balance. You should not just focus on strengthening your abs, or kegels for pelvic floor strength, or just squats for leg strength in birth.



- Squats build strength and endurance in your legs but they also do the same for your pelvic floor and core “corset”. Squat at least 10 times a day.
- Carrying something heavy in one hand, a carseat, a suitcase, a kettlebell will build core strength and stability.
- Properly holding something overhead, preferably in one hand, will challenge your core stability in a ‘functional’ way as well as build strength in your upper body. Try walking lunges while you hold a dumbbell straight overhead.
- A strong core reduces risk of back pain/injury because the muscles of your core wrap around and attach to your spine.
- Strong pelvic floor muscles don’t come from strict kegels. Only contracting a muscle group, like kegels, can actually make them weaker because that’s not how muscles function. They need to stretch (when you squat down) AND shorten (contract).
- One important physical tip for women is to build the mind-body connection of FULLY relaxing your pelvic floor. If you don’t know how to think about relaxing your pelvic floor, you won’t know how to relax it during birth. Practice relaxing your belly and pelvic floor daily.
- This relaxation practice will help you go to the bathroom more easily. Also, get a Squatty Potty.
- A strong pelvic floor will increase your healing processes from a vaginal delivery. Just as a mindful, strong core will help you heal from a caesarean section.



What kinds of exercise can I do?

There are many types of exercise and the choice of what you do depends partly on your personal preference. Walking is the classic exercise for pregnancy because it is low impact, easy to vary the pace and easy to keep track of how much you are exercising. The more VARIED movement you participate in, the better! Other beneficial activities pregnant women enjoy include weight lifting, dancing, swimming, bicycling, water aerobics, yoga, hiking, running, and pilates.

Many old ideas about strenuous exercise during pregnancy have been disproved in recent years. The type and intensity of sports and movement you participate in during pregnancy depend on your health and on how active you were before you became pregnant. If you were active before you became pregnant, however, there is no reason you cannot continue, within reason. And if you were not active, this is a great time to start!

What exercises should I avoid?

- No scuba diving (risk for fetal decompression sickness)
- Avoid activities with high risk for abdominal trauma
- No contact sports
- Limit snow skiing, water skiing, and surfing due to the risk of falls
- Limit activities that cause bouncing, jarring, leaping, or sudden change of direction
- Avoid exercising to the maximum of your strength and endurance, especially in the last months of pregnancy

Who should not exercise during pregnancy?

While most pregnant women can exercise safely, some conditions may make it unsafe. Talk to your doctor or nurse midwife/nurse practitioner before starting or continuing an exercise program. He/she may advise you not to exercise if you have any of the following:

- Chronic lung or heart disease
- Incompetent cervix (dilating painlessly early in pregnancy)
- History of preterm labor or preterm contractions
- Persistent vaginal bleeding
- Shortness of breath
- Placenta previa (placenta covering the cervix) or other placental abnormality
- Pregnancy induced hypertension (high blood pressure of pregnancy) or preeclampsia
- Severe anemia
- Poor weight gain
- IUGR (intrauterine growth retardation or poor growth of the baby)
- Twins or triplets
- Premature rupture of membranes
- Heart disease
- Excessive obesity or extreme underweight

What about movement Postpartum?

After you give birth to your lovely babe(s), you'll want to immediately start rebuilding your mind-body connection to your core and pelvic floor by contracting and relaxing them.

Movement will boost your body's healing potential. When postpartum bleeding (lochia) stops, walking outside with baby in the stroller is a great place to start! By week 6, you might be feeling well enough to start exercising simply again. Start with body weight movements like glute bridges, squats, pushups, dead bugs, single arm carries.

Do NOT perform sit ups, crunches, planks, toes to bar, knees to chest, GHD sit ups, Olympic lifts, heavy lifting. Your core is NOT ready for this stress. **Do NOT** sit up in bed. Roll to your side and push yourself up with your arms just like you did during pregnancy.

STRETCH your chest, hip flexors, glutes, calves **DAILY**.

