

# Positive Pregnancy

**P**regnancy can be a time where people (even strangers) really treat you as 'fragile'! They are so willing to help you – carry your parcels, offer a seat, let you put your feet up, have a night off cooking... These are all very kind gestures and, yes, you do have to be cautious about overdoing things when pregnant; however, it doesn't mean you can sit on the couch for 9 months doing very little. In fact that kind of behaviour can actually have negative effects on your pregnancy health.

## ACTIVITY AND EXERCISE

Being physically active and exercising throughout your pregnancy is good for you and your baby. In the first trimester you may have to do activities that are less high impact but for the majority of mums exercising as you did before you were pregnant is perfectly safe. If you didn't exercise in the past you should try to do some activity throughout your pregnancy.

All women without contraindications should participate in aerobic and strength-conditioning exercises as part of a healthy lifestyle during their pregnancy. Reasonable goals of aerobic conditioning in pregnancy should be to maintain a good fitness level without trying to reach peak fitness (aiming to run a marathon while pregnant may be a little extreme). The benefits of staying active include the following:

- **Improved physical and mental wellbeing.** Exercise releases endorphins – happy hormones – that are known to reduce stress and anxiety, and relieve depression.
- **Maintaining a healthy weight during pregnancy** assists in returning to pre-baby weight more quickly and also reduces the risk of developing gestational diabetes or hypertension, for example.
- **A faster and easier labour.** The fitter you are, the stronger you will be through your delivery, making a faster and easier labour.

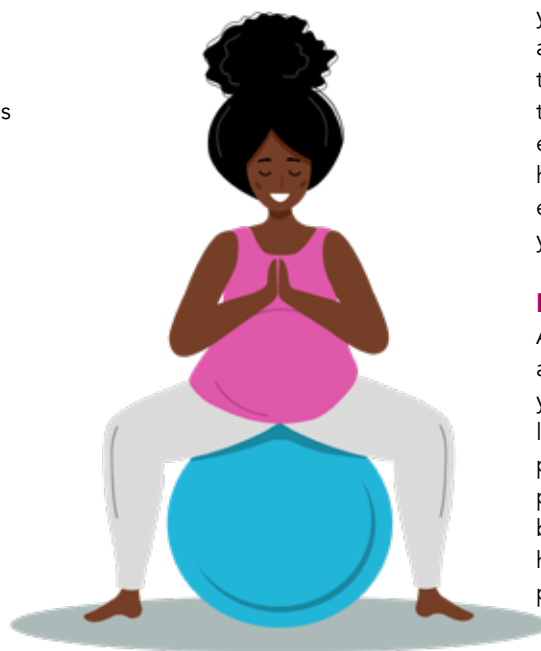
There are currently NO known adverse risks associated with meeting the



recommended guidelines of at least 150 minutes of moderate/vigorous physical activity per week. Obviously it will be good to chat to your doctor, midwife or physical therapist to get advice on what to do and where to start safely.

As pregnancy progresses, the body goes through significant changes:

- The ligaments at your joints become more stretchy (increased laxity) to allow for expansion of your growing belly and in preparation for delivery.

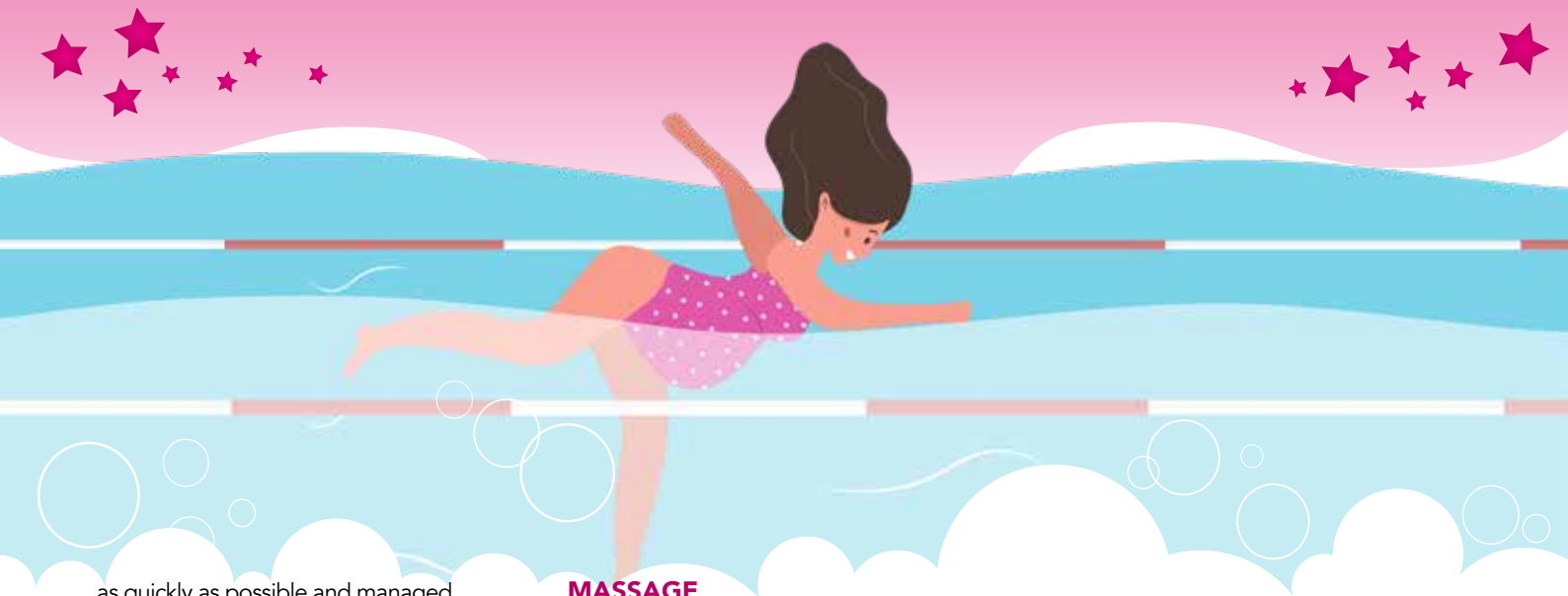


- A change in your centre of gravity (more weight protruding out the front) can place strain on the lower back, especially if your core abdominal muscles are not strong.
- An increased resting heart rate may also require you to make changes to your exercise programme.
- Women participating in activities that require a high degree of balance or rapid changes in direction may need to consider changing their activity as balance and response rate can be compromised when pregnant; a fall or injury is not what you want to deal with.

So, exercising and maintaining activities, including doing daily chores, is all good and safe for you. Taking care not to overdo stretching or carrying heavy loads makes sense as your joints are 'vulnerable' to injury because of their increased laxity. However, this doesn't mean don't do things, just do them with care. Choose activities that won't place you in harm – don't climb a wobbly step ladder while preparing the nursery as your balance may be off, don't go tearing down a mountain bike trail with steep rough declines risking a fall. But DO continue to do the things you enjoy: have a ride, spring clean the house, bake and do yoga with friends, for example. If in doubt always check with your doctor or physical therapist first and be sensible. Your physical therapist can always give you specific exercises to do in the safety of your own home if you'd prefer. To learn more about exercising safely through pregnancy ask your practitioner for the related leaflets.

## BACK PAIN

As your pregnancy moves into the second and third trimester, the added weight of your growing baby and increasing ligament laxity can result in the development of back pain. Although it is fairly common, back pain during pregnancy should definitely not be accepted as just part of the process. To help make your pregnancy as pleasant as possible and facilitate an easier delivery, back pain should always be addressed



as quickly as possible and managed throughout your pregnancy. Often, the longer you neglect your back the worse it becomes. It is also not a given that the pain will miraculously disappear after giving birth. Quite often the back pain can persist for weeks or months as it takes time for your ligaments and muscles (especially your core abdominals) to recover. Added to this you are now repeatedly carrying and lifting your baby, which can add strain to your lower back.

If you develop back pain you are more likely to want to rest and lie down, which is a contradiction to the many benefits of being physically active throughout your pregnancy. Exercising and being active can help strengthen your back and relieve your pain. Actually, being inactive or sedentary is a risk factor for developing back pain in pregnancy. A physical therapist can help guide you through exercises to strengthen your back and gently stretch out tight painful muscles. Hands-on physical therapy is also safe during pregnancy. Gentle mobilisations of your lower back and pelvis, and release of muscles in spasm can be achieved while lying on your side – so don't avoid getting help.

Whether you have back pain or not, care should be taken on how you lift and carry your baby. Over time the repeated nature of caring for a newborn can result in back pain developing or getting worse. Your physical therapist can give you advice on posture and lifting techniques, the use of changing tables for example, all to reduce the strain on your lower back. Ask your practitioner for the related leaflets for more advice on back pain and back care, including correct postures and exercises.

## MASSAGE

Massage by a physical therapist or massage therapist (who is trained in pregnancy massage) is also safe and hugely beneficial. The massage may be to relieve lower back pain in conjunction with exercises prescribed by your physical therapist. However, massage doesn't only have to be to relieve pain during pregnancy. These months building up to the birth can be stressful, it can take a toll on your body creating aches and pains, causing swelling in your legs. But often, more than that, it can take a toll on your mind and emotions. Pregnancy can be a stressful time – coping with work, caring for other children, anxiety or stress about the delivery, finances or relationships. Poor quality sleep is also common during pregnancy (although this may be in preparation for what is to come!). However, fatigue only makes you feel more emotional and anxious. Massage can create a sense of calm and relaxation, potentially helping you sleep better, reduce stress and anxiety, and improve depression. So don't just treat yourself to some pampering in the form of a massage: prescribe it as part of your pregnancy health and wellbeing. You may not need any more motivation to make an appointment but if you are unsure ask your practitioner for the related leaflets to learn more about the benefits and safety of massage.

## CARPAL TUNNEL SYNDROME

Oddly, wrist and hand pain, which may seem completely unrelated to your growing bump, is really common in pregnancy. Tingling, numbness and pain in the hand may be due to carpal tunnel syndrome (a term you may have heard to do with lots of

computer work). It happens when there is a build-up of fluid in the tissues in your wrist. This swelling squeezes a nerve, called the median nerve, that runs down to your hand and fingers. Apart from tingling, pain or numbness, you may also find your grip is weaker and it's harder to move your fingers, you become clumsy – even dropping things. Not ideal when you are going to be having to carry a baby around soon! The pain can be so severe it affects a mother's ability to even hold their baby in certain positions. It does, however, start to ease off after birth as swelling in your body resolves. Treatment can help though, a splint and exercises from a physical therapist can reduce the pain and strengthen your wrist. Hands-on treatments can relieve pain and reduce swelling. To learn more ask your practitioner for the related leaflets.

Pregnancy is not a time to sit back and relax – however nice that may seem. Instead it should be a time to embrace exercise and physical activity to ensure a healthy pregnancy, easier delivery and a faster recovery. Being active may help to stave off back pain. However, if you do develop pain, anywhere, don't just accept it as a rite of passage to motherhood. There are many safe therapies and techniques that can be used while pregnant to relieve pain, discomfort and swelling as well as reduce stress and improve depression. Chat to your local physical therapist to get advice specific to your needs and where you are in your pregnancy.

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