Exercising During Pregnancy



Pregnancy doesn't mean 9 months on the sofa eating for two, unfortunately. Here's how moving is great for you and your baby and what to consider.

You definitely don't need to avoid exercise for 9 months unless you have specific medical advice telling you not to do any. A few health conditions, mentioned below, do mean you should speak with your doctor or midwife first.

For many people, a certain level of activity can improve your and your baby's health while you're pregnant. It can also mean that you have a shorter labour with fewer complications and a faster recovery. It might seem surprising but if you don't normally exercise much, now is actually a great time to start.

Regular exercise can:

- help to reduce high blood pressure;
- help to reduce the risk of diabetes and may help to control gestational diabetes (diabetes only when pregnant);
- help you to adapt to your changing body shape and maintain a healthy weight during and after pregnancy;
- help to reduce the likelihood of varicose veins, swelling in ankles, feet and hands, and back pain;
- improve your fitness levels;
- improve mood, and reduce depression and anxiety;
- improve sleep;
- lower the risk of pre-eclampsia, very low birth weight and caesarean birth; and
- improve your body's ability to cope by shortening the length of labour and improving the likelihood of a straight-forward labour and easier recovery after the birth.



Exercise is safe for most women but speak to your doctor or midwife before exercising during pregnancy if you have any of the following:

- known heart problems or lung disease;
- known weakness of the cervix or if you've had a cervical stitch;
- a twin or multiple pregnancy;
- history of premature labour or any signs of premature labour in your pregnancy;
- premature waters breaking;
- vaginal bleeding that continues throughout your pregnancy;
- placenta praevia, which is where the placenta is close to the cervix;
- pre-eclampsia;
- poorly controlled diabetes, seizures or thyroid disease during pregnancy;
- anaemia during pregnancy;
- bone or joint problems that affect mobility
- an eating disorder;
- a body mass index higher than 40 or you are very inactive; or
- a smoking habit where you smoke more than 20 cigarettes a day.

EXERCISES TO DO

1. **Walking.** The bonus of heading through a park or woodland is that connecting with nature can reduce stress levels. You might particularly appreciate this relaxation during pregnancy.
2. **Yoga or Pilates.** This is a brilliant way to check in with your changing body and to ease any stress. Pilates can help strengthen the key muscles around the pelvis and spine too. Check that the instructor is qualified to teach pregnant women or, better still, attend a pregnancy-specific class. If you do yoga or Pilates at home, make sure the exercises you do are safe for pregnancy. Avoid:
   - lying on your back after 16 weeks;
   - exercises that include holding your breath or taking short forceful breaths;
   - stretches that put you under strain;
   - lying upside down or on your abdomen; and
   - back bends or strong twists.
3. **Aquanatal classes and swimming.** Aquanatal classes are aerobic exercise classes that you do in water. It's another great exercise during pregnancy as it can improve your cardiovascular fitness and muscle tone and help you relax. The beauty of exercising in the water is that it'll support your bump, and you'll have less muscle soreness afterwards and less risk of injury.
4. **Swimming.** Swimming is a miracle all-rounder. It's one of the safest exercises you can do during pregnancy. Benefits include easing swelling, a feeling of weightlessness and relief from lower back and/or sciatic pain. Swimming can also ease leg and foot swelling, relieve stress and help your baby into a good position for birth. Just avoid backstroke late on in your pregnancy as it can press on the main blood vessels in the abdomen.
5. **Weightlifting.** Again, don't start weightlifting if you haven't done it before but if you were a regular weightlifter pre-pregnancy, feel free to continue. Weight training can actually prepare you for the physical demands of labour. A few things to watch out for are that you might have to use lighter weights than before. You must also avoid certain positions, like those where you forcefully push or lift heavy weights while holding your breath as they can affect blood pressure. If you do classes, let your instructor know you are pregnant.
6. **Housework.** Sorry not to get you out of that one.
7. **Dancing, working out at the gym, cycling or running.** If you're used to cardiovascular exercise, it can be great to continue it during pregnancy. Continuing to run during pregnancy is fine. Evidence

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suggests it does not affect gestational age or birth weight centile. Just don't start running when pregnant if you didn't run before – try walking or swimming. Running can affect your knees and pelvic floor even if you're not pregnant but the pregnancy hormone relaxin makes you more injury prone than before.

8. **Aerobic classes.** Again, if you did aerobics before, you can carry on. Do make sure you tell the teacher so they can amend movements if needed.

EXERCISES TO AVOID

Although exercise during pregnancy is a great habit, some sports aren't advisable while you have a baby on board. If you're in any doubt, speak to your midwife or doctor but make sure you avoid the following.

1. **High-impact sport or vigorous racquet sports.** These can lead to abdominal trauma, falls or excessive joint stress.
2. **Scuba diving.** This can cause birth defects or foetal compression disease.
3. **Exercise over 2500m above sea level.** This might be an unusual one, we know, but it can lead to altitude sickness. If you are in those conditions and want to exercise, wait until you have acclimatised.

RECOMMENDATIONS ON HOW TO EXERCISE DURING PREGNANCY

Frequency

- Do at least **150 minutes** of moderate intensity aerobic physical activity throughout the week.
- Or do at least **75 minutes** of vigorous intensity aerobic physical activity throughout the week.
- Or do an equivalent combination of moderate and vigorous intensity activity.

Intensity Level

- Moderate and vigorous intensity should be guided by the Borg scale, the rate of perceived exertion (RPE) or the 'talk test' or alternatively heart rate zones.
- Importantly, no research to date has identified a 'safe' upper-limit intensity.
- Ultimately, listen to your body: be aware of signs and symptoms to cease physical activity immediately or consult your doctor.

Borg Scale of Perceived Exertion
You can choose to use a 1–20 rating, in which case, during pregnancy moderate to vigorous exercise should be considered a rating of 12–14.



Borg Scale of Perceived Exertion	
6 7 Very, very light 8	How you feel when lying in a bed or sitting in a chair relaxed Little or no effort
9 Very light 10 11 Fairly light	Target area when doing general physical activities
12 13 Somewhat hard 14 15 Hard 16	Target area when doing exercise
17 Very hard 18 19 Very, very hard 20 Maximum exertion	How you felt with the hardest work you have ever done Don't work this hard!

If you are using the Borg scale, a level of 1–10 during pregnancy is moderate intensity exercise and should be considered a RPE of between 3 and 4, whereas vigorous intensity exercise would be a rating of 5 or greater.

RPE Scale	Rate of Perceived Exertion
10	**Max Effort Activity** Feels almost impossible to keep going. Completely out of breath, unable to talk. Cannot maintain for more than a very short time
9	**Very Hard Activity** Very difficult to maintain exercise intensity. Can barely breathe and speak only a few words
7–8	**Vigorous Activity** Borderline uncomfortable. Short of breath, can speak a sentence
4–6	**Moderate Activity** Breathing heavily, can hold a short conversation, Still somewhat comfortable, but becoming noticeably more challenging
2–3	**Light Activity** Feels like you can mainatin for hours. East to breathe and carry a conversation
1	**Very Light Activity** Hardly any exertion, but more than sleeping, watching TV, etc

Heart Rate Zones for Moderate Exercise Intensity

Age	Heart Rate Range (beats per minute)	Heart Rate Range (beats per 10 seconds)
Less than 20 years old	140–155	23–26
20–29 years old	135–150	22–25
30–39 years old	130–145	21–24
40 or older	125–140	20–23

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Talk Test

The easiest and simplest way to monitor your workout intensity would probably be the talk test. As the name implies, you are exercising at a comfortable intensity if you are able to maintain a conversation during exercise; you should reduce the exercise intensity if this is not possible.

- Moderate intensity: you can still talk, but can't sing.
- Vigorous intensity: it is hard to talk, you can only say one word at a time.

Time

- Doing any physical activity is better than none. If you currently do no physical activity, start by doing some small chores at home, a short walk in the garden or around the block for 5 minutes to start with and gradually build up to the recommended amount.
- Aim to do at least 150 minutes of moderate intensity aerobic physical activity throughout the week.
- This is 30 minutes a day, which can be broken into bouts of 10 minutes' duration.

Type of Exercise

1. **Aerobic exercise.** This includes anything that gets your heart rate up a little. That can be walking, running, cycling, aerobics, dancing or swimming, for example.
2. **Strength training.** This can include weightlifting or light weights at home or at the gym, or any resistance band exercises, for example. Doing specific strengthening exercises for your core will help reduce back pain and aid your recovery. Also, having strong legs and pelvic girdle muscles will help during the delivery. Your therapist can also teach you pelvic floor exercises, which help in labour and also reduce the chance of experiencing incontinence.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF WHEN TO STOP EXERCISING

If any of the following are experienced during or after exercise ensure you contact your doctor or midwife immediately: abdominal pain, any 'gush' of fluid from the vagina, calf pain or swelling, chest pain, decreased foetal movement, dizziness or feeling lightheaded, dyspnea (shortness of breath) before exertion, excessive fatigue, headache, pelvic pain, excessive shortness of breath, painful uterine contractions and vaginal bleeding.

ELITE ATHLETES

Elite athletes who continue to train during pregnancy require supervision by an obstetric care provider with knowledge of the impact of strenuous exercise on maternal and foetal outcomes. Women with special needs may require a referral to a physiotherapist, exercise physiologist or sports medicine specialist to develop an appropriate exercise programme.

Remember: when exercising it is important to stay well hydrated, wear comfortable and non-restrictive clothing and, where possible, do avoid excessive over-heating.



The information contained in this article is intended as general guidance and information only and should not be relied upon as a basis for planning individual medical care or as a substitute for specialist medical advice in each individual case. ©Co-Kinetic 2021

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