

Fitness for Two

Regular exercise leads to improved fitness for pregnant women, just as it does for all women and men, and helps keep the heart, mind and entire body healthy. It helps prevent health problems like heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, osteoporosis (bone loss), anxiety and depression and, possibly, some forms of cancer. And, for the pregnant woman, it eases many of the common discomforts of pregnancy, such as constipation, backache, fatigue and varicose veins.

For many women, exercise is an important part of their lives, and they want to continue their exercise programs during pregnancy. Women who were fit before pregnancy can safely maintain their level of fitness throughout pregnancy by exercising moderately, according to the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG). Numerous studies have demonstrated that, in low-risk pregnancies, neither moderate nor vigorous exercise harms the fetus.

Women who feel they do not have the time or desire to participate in a regular exercise program can obtain many of the health benefits of exercise by following an active lifestyle, according to 1996 recommendations from the National Institutes of Health. This means accumulating 30 minutes or more a day of moderately strenuous activities-such as walking, cycling, housework or gardening-on most, or preferably all, days of the week. Unlike past recommendations, which stated that a person needed to exercise continuously for about 30 minutes at least three times a week to obtain health benefits, the new recommendations say that short bouts of activity (at least 10 minutes each) several times a day also are effective.

Pregnant women who have not exercised regularly in the past may consider gradually increasing their activities or starting a mild exercise program to reap some of these health benefits. All pregnant women should check with a health care provider before starting or continuing exercise. Most women will be able to maintain their exercise program throughout pregnancy, although some may need to modify their activities. Here's what a pregnant woman needs to know to exercise safely.

Does Pregnancy Change How a Woman's Body Responds to Physical Activity?

During pregnancy, a woman's body changes in a number of important ways that alter her response to exercise and her tolerance of it. For example, pregnant women require more oxygen than nonpregnant women, even when they are at rest. And, as pregnancy progresses, pregnant women have to work harder to breathe as the enlarging uterus crowds the diaphragm (the large muscle separating the chest and abdomen). These changes mean that there is less oxygen available for exercise and it is easier to become out of breath. A pregnant woman's tolerance for strenuous exercise decreases as pregnancy progresses.

Her cardiovascular system also undergoes changes, and it responds differently to certain body positions. After the fourth month of pregnancy, if a woman exercises while lying flat on her back, her expanding uterus may compress the major low vein (vena cava) that carries blood back to the heart. This causes the heart to beat more slowly, sometimes causing dizziness and interfering with normal blood flow to the uterus. Similarly, motionless standing also causes the heart to beat more slowly.

What Are Some Guidelines for Exercising Safely During Pregnancy?

In 1994, ACOG revised its recommendations for exercising safely during pregnancy. The following summary of its guidelines applies to low-risk pregnant women who have checked with their health care providers to make sure that they can continue their exercise programs.

- You can continue to exercise and derive health benefits even from mild-to-moderate exercise. Regular exercise (at least three times a week) is preferable to intermittent activity.
- Avoid exercising on your back after the first trimester. Also avoid prolonged periods of motionless standing. Both can reduce blood flow to the uterus.

- Since you have less oxygen available for exercise, stop exercising when you become fatigued, and do not exercise to exhaustion.
- Avoid exercises in which a loss of balance could be harmful. Avoid any exercise that could cause even mild trauma to the abdomen. Eat an adequate diet to gain 25 to 35 pounds over the nine months. Most pregnant women require an additional 300 calories a day. If you exercise regularly, you will probably require more. (Include plenty of carbohydrates, as pregnant women use up this fuel source more quickly during exercise than nonpregnant women.)
- Avoid overheating, especially in the first trimester. Drink plenty of fluids before and during exercise, wear layers of 'breathable' clothing, do not exercise on hot, humid days, and avoid immersing yourself in a hot tub or sauna.

What Sports Are Best During Pregnancy?

Most pregnant women can continue their pre-pregnancy exercise programs, though may need to modify some activities or decrease the intensity of workouts as pregnancy progresses. For example, a jogger who is quickly becoming fatigued or breathless may switch to brisk walking.

The ACOG exercise guidelines urge pregnant women to listen to their own bodies and let their endurance and abilities guide them. A pregnant woman always should stop exercising when she begins to feel fatigued. And she should not feel discouraged if she cannot exercise as much as she might like, as even mild to moderate exercise should allow her to retain her level of fitness. A pregnant woman always should stop exercising immediately if she experiences symptoms such as breathlessness, dizziness, headaches, muscle weakness, nausea, chest pain or tightness, uterine contractions or vaginal bleeding.

According to ACOG, women who perform non weight-bearing activities, such as cycling or swimming, are more likely to be able to continue exercising at high intensity through the third trimester than women who perform weight-bearing exercises, such as jogging or aerobic dancing. Non weight-bearing activities also appear to decrease the risk of injury, though bicycle riders may want to switch to a stationary bicycle, as it may be more difficult to maintain balance as pregnancy proceeds.

If a pregnant woman is just starting an exercise program (with her health care provider's go-ahead), walking, swimming and cycling on a stationary bicycle are activities that are safe for most women. Exercises that all pregnant women should avoid include waterskiing, diving, snowmobiling and horseback riding. Downhill skiing also can be dangerous due to the risk of hard falls, especially in the third trimester when balance may be affected. If you do ski, stay on safe slopes.