Exercise

This sheet is about exercise in pregnancy and while breastfeeding. This information is based on published research studies. It should not take the place of medical care and advice from your healthcare providers.

Can I exercise during pregnancy?

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans and The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) recommends that pregnant women without medical or pregnancy complications aim to do at least 150 minutes (2 hours and 30 minutes) of moderate intensity exercise each week.

Moderate intensity means you move enough to raise your heart rate and start to sweat. It also means that you can still talk normally, but you cannot sing.

150 minutes of exercise can be spread over the days of the week. For example, you can divide the 150 minutes into 30-minute workouts on 5 days of the week or into smaller 10-minute workouts throughout each day. Women who are new to exercise can start out slowly and work up to 150 minutes a week.

You may not be able to exercise while pregnant if you have had a preterm delivery (birth before week 37), or currently have ongoing vaginal bleeding, anemia (blood has a hard time carrying oxygen), uterine contractions, or other pregnancy-related complications. Please check with your healthcare provider to see if you should exercise during pregnancy. You should also check with your healthcare provider before starting or continuing an exercise program if you have a history of medical concerns such as heart or lung problems or high blood pressure.

I exercise. Can it make it harder for me to become pregnant?

Light to moderate exercise is not expected to make it harder to become pregnant. Vigorous exercise, defined as causing shortness of breath and only being able to say 1 or 2 words, might reduce the number of times a woman has a menstrual cycle (period); which would affect fertility. On the other hand, exercise might improve fertility in women with polycystic ovary syndrome and obesity.

Does exercise harm my pregnancy in any way?

Birth defects can happen in any pregnancy for different reasons. Out of all babies born each year, about 3 out of 100 (3%) will have a birth defect. We look at research studies to try to understand if an exposure, like exercise, might increase the chance of birth defects in a pregnancy. Also, miscarriage is common and can occur in any pregnancy for many different reasons.

When done in moderation and under the guidance of your healthcare provider, exercise is not expected to increase the chance of miscarriage, birth defects, or preterm delivery (birth before week 37). Studies show no relationship between exercise and distress or heart rate changes in a fetus. One study found that moderate to high intensity exercise in the later stages of pregnancy can lead to smaller, leaner babies that are still within the normal size range for newborns.

Will exercise be harder during pregnancy?

The body goes through many changes throughout pregnancy that could change your ability and tolerance to exercise. As pregnancy goes on, the amount of blood in your body and your heart rate increases. This means your body works harder to give enough nutrients and oxygen to both you and your pregnancy, so there is less oxygen available for exercise. This change in blood flow could also make you feel light-headed.

As your pregnancy grows larger, your sense of balance changes, which means you may need to adjust your posture. This shift in posture can make certain types of exercise (such as running, yoga, and free weights) more challenging. Joints also become looser due to hormonal changes. Looser joints mean there is a higher chance of strains or sprains during otherwise routine movements and exercise.

What are the benefits of exercising during pregnancy?

Exercise is important for your physical and mental health. It may improve mood and sleep patterns and might help prevent or treat gestational diabetes. Exercise may also ease some of the common discomforts of pregnancy such as

constipation, backache, fatigue, leg swelling, and varicose veins.

What are some basic guidelines for exercising during pregnancy?

If your pregnancy is not high risk, and you have checked with your healthcare provider, some basic guidelines to keep in mind include:

- Exercise most days of the week.
- During the second and third trimesters, avoid exercise that involves lying flat on your back because this causes less blood flow for both you andyour pregnancy.
- Avoid exercising to the pointwhere you are exhausted or out of breath.
- Be aware that your sense of balance will change throughout pregnancy, which could lead to falls.
- Drink plenty offluidsbefore and during exercise.
- Avoid overheating your body, especially in the first trimester.

What types of exercises are good choices during pregnancy?

Most women can continue their pre-pregnancy exercise routine during pregnancy, but you may need to modify some activities. Listen to your body and stop when you feel too tired or if you feel dizziness, headaches, muscle weakness, nausea, chest pain, fewer fetal movements, or have contractions. Do not get discouraged: even mild to moderate exercise can help your fitness level and mood.

Most women can participate in a wide range of recreational activities. Non-weight bearing exercises such as stationary cycling, swimming, or water aerobics are the easiest on your body throughout your entire pregnancy. Check with your healthcare provider if you are wondering if you should try a certain type of exercise or activity.

What types of exercise should I try to avoid during pregnancy?

ACOG does not recommend contact sports or activities that can increase the risk of injury or falls during pregnancy. Contact sports such as ice hockey, soccer, and basketball could cause trauma to both you and your pregnancy. In addition, the chance of falling during activities such as gymnastics, horseback riding, jet skiing, water skiing, surfing, and downhill skiing may be higher during pregnancy from changes in balance. Scuba diving, skydiving, or any exercise at or above altitudes of 6,000 feet are not recommended since they are all associated with lower oxygen levels. Hot yoga (also known as Bikram yoga) and hot Pilates are done in rooms that are usually between 95ºF and 104ºF (35ºC to 40ºC). These activities are not recommended during pregnancy due to the very high temperatures and the lack of information in pregnancy. Check with your healthcare provider if you are wondering if you should try a certain type of exercise or activity.

If I am doing intense training, is there anything I should consider while pregnant?

Talk with your healthcare provider about your training and goals. As an athlete, you may need to change your training program at each stage of pregnancy. While there may be risk involved in physical activity for some women, most healthcare providers believe that the benefits of being active far outweigh the risks, even for those who wish to continue participation at an elite level. Your pre-pregnancy levels of fitness, as well as your particular sport, must be considered when planning how intensely, how long, and how often you exercise. When done under the care and guidance of your healthcare provider, it is unlikely that your exercise program or sport will cause problems.

Studies have found that some athletes use supplementation to enhance performance. However, information on the use of supplements in pregnancy is often very limited. Be sure to talk to your healthcare provider if you are thinking about taking any supplements while pregnant or breastfeeding. MotherToBaby has a fact sheet on herbal products at: https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/herbal-products-pregnancy/.

When can I begin to exercise after giving birth?

Talk to your healthcare provider to find out how soon you can begin to exercise after giving birth. Your body will continue to go through changes from your pregnancy for many weeks after your baby is born. How long you should wait will depend on a few factors, including how active you were able to be during pregnancy, any health problems you have, and what type of delivery you had.

Breastfeeding while exercising:

When done in moderation and under the guidance of your healthcare provider, exercise is not expected to affect breastfeeding. Most women will make the same amount of milk whether they exercise or not. However, it is extremely important to drink plenty of water while breastfeeding, especially if you exercise. Be sure to talk to your healthcare provider about all of your breastfeeding questions.

If a man exercises, could it affect his fertility or increase the chance of birth defects?

Exercise is not expected to affect male fertility (ability to make healthy sperm). Studies have not been done to see if exercise in men could increase the chance of birth defects in a partner's pregnancy. In general, exposures that men have are unlikely to increase the risks to a pregnancy. For more information, please see the MotherToBaby fact sheet Paternal Exposures and Pregnancy at https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/paternal-exposures-pregnancy/.

Please click here for references.

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