

Patient Information

Common questions about exercise in pregnancy

Now that I'm pregnant, is it safe to exercise as much as I did before? What if I'm a beginner?

First ask your doctor, of course, as any discussion of this topic can only be a general one. She or he knows you and can best assess any possible risks to your health - or that of your baby. Clearly, all exercise is not the same - activities like running and cycling are a lot more strenuous than a walk in the park. Even so, you may be surprised at what you can safely do, as long as you fall into the low-risk category. Studies continue to show that if you're like most healthy women with uncomplicated pregnancies, you can - and should - maintain your prepregnancy activity levels, because doing so may convey short- and long-term benefits to both you and your baby. First-time exercisers should proceed more cautiously. (Conversely, exercise is usually taboo if you have a chronic disease or have had problems in a previous pregnancy. Your obstetrician-gynecologist can best advise you.)

What level and amount of exercise are officially recommended?

Exercise three times a week - or more - at a comfortable pace, but limit the length and intensity of your workout, cautions the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG). They feel you're overdoing it if it exhausts you, and advise you to warm up first, cool down afterwards, and avoid getting overheated in warm weather. These guidelines, which recognize the importance of regular exercise for all healthy pregnant women, have stood the test of time. (Some researchers, though, feel the guidelines don't go far enough and say that even a high-intensity level may have its place - so check with your doctor.) ACOG also recommends drinking plenty of water while you exercise. Moreover, choose a type of exercise that lessens the chance of personal injury to you or your baby.

What are the best types of exercise - and what's off-limits?

While ACOG believes that swimming and stationary cycling are the safest choices to keep you from being physically injured, others argue for more latitude. Most agree on walking and low-impact aerobics. Do avoid activities with a potential for falls, though. Some researchers feel that weight-bearing exercise at the levels recommended by ACOG is okay for sedentary women as early as the 8th week. Moreover, if you've exercised regularly before your pregnancy, they feel you can safely expand your exercise repertoire and exercise at a level of moderate intensity all through your pregnancy for an hour 5 days a week. They usually discourage biking, skiing, or hiking at extreme elevations, given the higher rates of pregnancy complications associated with living at altitudes above 10,000 feet.

How can a woman benefit from continuing high-volume weight-bearing exercise during pregnancy?

Regularly doing weight-bearing exercise (like aerobics or running) for an hour, five days a week, during pregnancy keeps you fit and improves your overall cardiovascular function both during and after pregnancy. It improves your metabolism, helping to keep your weight gain within healthy limits and to keep you more fat-free, again before and after. You experience less stress and have a better sense of well-being. But your biggest personal payoff may be a shorter, less complicated labor and quick recovery once you've given birth.

How does the fetus benefit from continuing high-volume weight-bearing exercise?

Even by just exercising moderately in early pregnancy, you're stimulating the growth of the placenta (from which your baby receives his or her nourishment in the womb). Again, how much you exercise

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in late pregnancy greatly affects the baby's size at birth. Your baby will be less likely to suffer fetal distress both before and during labor. Researchers are also finding that a child whose mother exercised sufficiently during pregnancy is likely to be leaner as a 5-year-old and that neurodevelopment is improved both at birth and through age 5.

As far as diet is concerned, should I just count calories?

Indeed not. Your definition of a well-balanced diet should include the *type* of carbohydrate you consume. That has a significant effect on both how much weight you gain and your baby's birthweight, according to new research. Obtaining carbohydrates from unprocessed sources like nuts, fruit, and whole-grain breads is healthier than the alternative for any woman. Don't eat just before or while you're exercising, though. The ideal eating pattern is 2 to 3 hours before exercising and immediately afterwards.

When should I be cautious and what danger signs should I look out for?

Stop exercising and notify your doctor at once if any of the following signs or symptoms occur: if you have any pain anywhere (especially abdominal), vaginal bleeding of any amount, persistent contractions (lasting more than 20 minutes after exercise), no fetal motion for 20 minutes after you exercise, and fluid leakage from the vagina suggesting membrane rupture. You should be checked by your physician before resuming exercise if any of these things occur.

Sources: American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. *Exercise during pregnancy and postpartum period*. ACOG Technical Bulletin No. 189: Washington, DC. ACOG Press, 1994

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