Pregnancy and exercise

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All women who are pregnant without complications should be encouraged to participate in aerobic and strength-conditioning exercises as part of a healthy lifestyle during their pregnancy.

A goal of aerobic conditioning in pregnancy should be to maintain a good fitness level throughout pregnancy without trying to reach peak fitness.

There are numerous potential health benefits for women who exercise during pregnancy, including better weight control, improved mood and maintenance of fitness levels. Regular exercise during pregnancy can also decrease the risk of pregnancy-related complications such as pregnancy-induced hypertension and pre-eclampsia. Before exercising when pregnant, consult your doctor, physiotherapist or healthcare professional. You may need to modify your existing exercise program or choose a suitable new one if you were exercising very little before getting pregnant.

Benefits of exercise during pregnancy

Exercise during pregnancy offers many physical and emotional benefits. Physical activity may also help manage some symptoms of pregnancy and make you feel better, knowing you’re doing something good for yourself and your baby.

Some of the benefits of regular exercise throughout your pregnancy include:

- enjoyment
- increased energy
- improved fitness
- reduced back and pelvic pain
- decreased risk of pregnancy complications such as pre-eclampsia and pregnancy-induced hypertension
- preparation for the physical demands of labour
- fewer complications in delivery
- faster recuperation after labour
- prevention and management of urinary incontinence
- improved posture
- improved circulation
- weight control
- stress relief
- reduced risk of anxiety and depression
- improved sleep and management of insomnia
- increased ability to cope with the physical demands of motherhood.

Exercising and changes associated with pregnancy

Your body will undergo many changes during pregnancy. Some will affect your ability to exercise, or require you to modify your exercise routine, including:

- Hormones such as relaxin loosen ligaments, which could increase your risk of joint injuries (such as sprains).
- As pregnancy progresses, your weight will increase and you will experience changes in weight distribution and body shape. This results in the body’s centre of gravity moving forward, which can alter your balance and coordination.
- Pregnancy increases your resting heart rate, so don’t use your target heart rate to work out the intensity of your exercise. In healthy pregnant women, exercise intensity can be monitored using a method known as Borg’s Rating of Perceived Exertion (RPE) scale. This measures how hard you feel (perceive) your body is working.
- Your blood pressure drops in the second trimester, so it is important to avoid rapid changes of position – from lying to standing and vice versa – so as not to experience dizzy spells.

Exercise suggestions during pregnancy

Pre-exercise screening is used to identify people with medical conditions that may put them at a higher risk of experiencing a health problem during physical activity. It is a filter or ‘safety net’ to help decide if the potential benefits of exercise outweigh the risks for you.

Read through the pre-exercise self-screening tool before embarking on a new physical activity or exercise program.

If you have been cleared to exercise, and you participated in physical activity before you were pregnant, it is recommended that you:

- Do at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity on most, if not all, days of the week.
- Let your body be your guide. You know you’re at a good exercise intensity when you can talk normally (but cannot sing) and do not become exhausted too quickly.
- If you are healthy and you are not experiencing complications in your pregnancy, continue this level of activity throughout pregnancy, or until it becomes...
If you have been cleared to exercise, but you were inactive before your pregnancy:

- Start with low-intensity exercises such as walking or swimming, and build up to moderate intensity activity.
- Aim to do at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity on most, if not all, days of the week. You can start with separate sessions of 15 minutes each, and build up to longer durations.
- Let your body be your guide. You know you’re at a good exercise intensity when you can talk normally (but cannot sing) and do not become exhausted too quickly.
- If you are healthy and you are not experiencing complications in your pregnancy, continue this level of activity throughout pregnancy, or until it becomes uncomfortable for you to do so.
- Be guided by your doctor, physiotherapist or healthcare professional.

**Suggested exercise activities during pregnancy**

Activities that are generally safe during pregnancy, even for beginners, include:

- walking
- swimming
- cycling – outdoors or on a stationary bicycle
- jogging
- muscle strengthening exercises, including pelvic floor exercises
- exercise in water (aquarobics)
- yoga, stretching and other floor exercises
- Pilates
- pregnancy exercise classes.

**Cautions for pregnancy exercise**

While most forms of exercise are safe, there are some exercises that involve positions and movements that may be uncomfortable or harmful for pregnant women. Be guided by your doctor or physiotherapist, but general cautions include:

- Avoid raising your body temperature too high – for example, don’t soak in hot spas or exercise to the point of heavy sweating. Reduce your level of exercise on hot or humid days. Stay well hydrated.
- Don't exercise to the point of exhaustion.
- If weight training, choose low weights and medium to high repetitions – avoid lifting heavy weights altogether.
- Perform controlled stretching and avoid over-extending.
- Avoid exercise if you are ill or feverish.
- If you don’t feel like exercising on a particular day, don’t! It is important to listen to your body to avoid unnecessarily depleting your energy reserves.
- In addition, if you develop an illness or a complication of pregnancy, talk with your doctor or midwife before continuing or restarting your exercise program.

**Exercises to avoid while pregnant**

During pregnancy, avoid sports and activities with increased risk of, or characterised by:

- abdominal trauma or pressure – such as weightlifting
- contact or collision – such as martial arts, soccer, basketball and other competition sports
- hard projectile objects or striking implements – such as hockey, cricket or softball
- falling – such as downhill skiing, horse riding and skating
- extreme balance, co-ordination and agility – such as gymnastics
- significant changes in pressure – such as SCUBA diving
- heavy lifting
- high-altitude training at over 2000 m
- supine exercise position (lying on your back) – the weight of the baby can slow the return of blood to the heart; some of these exercises can be modified by lying on your side
- wide squats or lunges.

If you're not sure whether a particular activity is safe during pregnancy, check with your healthcare professional.

**Pelvic floor exercises and pregnancy**

Your pelvic floor muscles are weakened during pregnancy and during birth (vaginal delivery), so it is extremely important to begin conditioning the pelvic floor muscles from the start of your pregnancy.

Appropriate exercises can be prescribed by a physiotherapist. It is important to continue with these throughout your pregnancy and resume as soon as is comfortable after the birth.

**Abdominal exercises and pregnancy**

Strong abdominal muscles support your spine. The internal core and pelvic floor abdominal muscles act as a natural ‘corset’ to protect the pelvis and lumbar spine.

During pregnancy, it is common for women to experience the condition known as diastasis recti abdominis – a painless splitting of the abdominal muscle at the midline.
also known as abdominal separation. Traditional sit-ups or crunches may worsen this condition, and can be ineffective during pregnancy.

Appropriate core stability exercises are recommended during pregnancy to strengthen the muscles of the abdomen. For example:

- Concentrate on drawing your belly button towards your spine.
- Breathe out while pulling in your belly.
- Hold the position and count to 10. Relax and breathe in.
- Repeat 10 times, as many times a day as you are able.
- You can perform this exercise sitting, standing or on your hands and knees.

**Warning signs when exercising during pregnancy**

If you experience any of the following during or after physical activity, stop exercising immediately and see your doctor:

- headache
- dizziness or feeling faint
- heart palpitations
- chest pain
- swelling of the face, hands or feet
- calf pain or swelling
- vaginal bleeding
- contractions
- deep back, pubic or pelvic pain
- cramping in the lower abdomen
- walking difficulties
- an unusual change in your baby’s movements
- amniotic fluid leakage
- unusual shortness of breath
- excessive fatigue
- muscle weakness.

**Where to get help**

- Your doctor
- Midwife
- Physiotherapist
- National Continence Helpline Tel. 1800 33 00 66
- Bicycle Network Tel. (03) 8376 8888 – for further information on cycling and pregnancy

**References**

- Measuring physical activity intensity, 2015, Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity and Obesity, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, USA. More information here.

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Healthy pregnancy

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- Pregnancy and birth basics
- Stages of pregnancy
- Fertility issues and options
- Keeping healthy during pregnancy
- Health concerns during pregnancy
- Pregnancy for birth
- Preparing for a newborn

Pregnancy and birth basics

- Childbirth - pain relief options
Understanding your pain relief options can help you cope better with the pain of childbirth.

- **Pregnancy - labour**
  
  Labour is divided into three stages. The first stage is dilation of the cervix from 0 to 10 cm, the second stage is birth of the baby, and the third stage is delivery of the placenta. Labour typically...

- **Pregnancy - premature labour**
  
  Sometimes, babies arrive early. It’s important to recognise premature labour, in case you and your baby need medical care.

- **Contraception after giving birth**
  
  If you want to get pregnant, timing is everything.

  If you are trying for a baby, to increase your chances of conceiving, it helps to know when you are at your most fertile, and when is the best time to have sex.

- **Pregnancy testing**
  
  Sometimes, a home pregnancy test may be positive when a woman isn’t pregnant.

- **Folate for pregnant women**
  
  Even women who aren't planning to have a baby should increase their folate intake in case of unplanned pregnancy.

- **Pregnancy - unplanned**
  
  When a woman does not want to become a parent, her pregnancy options may include abortion or adoption.

- **Contraception - emergency contraception**
  
  It is best to take emergency contraception as soon as possible, ideally within 24 hours of having unprotected sex, but it still works well within 96 hours (four days).

### Stages of pregnancy

- **Baby due date**
  
  Pregnancy is calculated from the first day of your last period, not from the date of conception.

- **Pregnancy - week by week**
  
  Pregnancy is counted as 40 weeks, starting from the first day of the mother's last menstrual period.

- **Pregnancy - signs and symptoms**
  
  All women experience pregnancy differently, and you will experience different symptoms at different stages of your pregnancy.

- **Planning for labour and birth**
  
  Some of the signs and symptoms of going into labour may include period-like cramps, backache, diarrhoea and contractions.

- **Conceiving a baby**
  
  The odds of a young fertile couple conceiving by having sexual intercourse around the time of ovulation (the release of the egg from the ovary) are approximately one in five every month. Around nine...

- **Pregnancy stages and changes**
  
  It’s helpful to have an idea of how your body may react to the different stages of pregnancy. It also helps to know how pregnancy may affect your emotions and feelings.

### Fertility issues and options

- **Adoption**
  
  Adoption can give a secure family life to children who can't live with their birth family.

- **Surrogacy**
  
  Surrogacy is a form of assisted reproductive treatment (ART) in which a woman carries a child within her uterus on behalf of another person or couple.

- **If you want to get pregnant, timing is everything**
  
  If you are trying for a baby, to increase your chances of conceiving, it helps to know when you are at your most fertile, and when is the best time to have sex.

- **Age and fertility**
  
  Age affects the fertility of both men and women, and is the single biggest factor affecting a woman's chance to conceive and have a healthy baby.
Infertility in men
A couple isn't suspected of fertility problems until they have tried and failed to conceive for one year.

Infertility in women
The odds of a young fertile couple conceiving by having sexual intercourse around the time of ovulation are approximately one in five every month.

Abortion
All women should have access to accurate information about abortion so they can make their own informed decisions.

Weight, fertility and pregnancy health
Compared with women in the healthy weight range, women who are carrying extra weight are less likely to conceive.

Keeping healthy during pregnancy

Pregnancy - morning sickness
Morning sickness is typically at its worst early in the day but it can strike at any point during the day or night.

Postnatal exercise - sample workout
Make sure your abdominal muscles have healed before you do any vigorous tummy exercises, such as crunches.

Healthy eating during pregnancy - tack talk tips
Some foods should be avoided during pregnancy as they carry bacteria that could harm your unborn baby.

Postnatal exercise
Always consult with your doctor or midwife before starting any postnatal exercise program.

Pregnancy and your mental health
Finding out you are pregnant can be a very exciting time. But it can also make you feel uncomfortable, unwell, worried and make you wonder how you are going to cope. And it doesn’t stop when the baby.

Pregnancy and teeth
It’s important to look after your teeth and gums when you’re pregnant, as gum disease can affect your baby.

Tests, scans and checks - pregnancy and labour
Tests can confirm your pregnancy and also monitor your baby’s development in the womb.

Alcohol and pregnancy
There’s no safe level of alcohol use during pregnancy. It’s safest to not drink at all during pregnancy, when trying to conceive, and while breastfeeding.

Pregnancy and smoking
Smoking while pregnant exposes a woman and her unborn child to an increased risk of health problems.

Immunisation and pregnancy
Immunisation can protect a woman and her unborn baby against many infectious diseases.

Folate for pregnant women
Even women who aren’t planning to have a baby should increase their folate intake in case of unplanned pregnancy.

Pregnancy and exercise
Unless you have complications, you should be able to exercise throughout your pregnancy.

Pelvic floor
Pelvic floor exercises are designed to improve muscle tone and prevent the need for corrective surgery.

Pregnancy and diet
Good nutrition during pregnancy can help to keep you and your developing baby healthy.

Pregnancy and travel
Travelling to developing nations is not encouraged during pregnancy, due to the risk of disease and the standard of medical facilities.

Health concerns during pregnancy

Miscarriage and Stillbirth - Coming to terms (video)
• **Newborn bloodspot screening (video)**
  Every newborn baby in Australia is offered a newborn bloodspot screening test to identify those at risk for rare, but serious, medical conditions including PKU, hypothyroidism and cystic fibrosis.

• **Placenta previa**
  Placenta previa means the placenta has implanted at the bottom of the uterus, over the cervix or close by...

• **Placental abruption**
  Placental abruption means the placenta has detached from the wall of the uterus, starving the baby of oxygen and nutrients...

• **Pregnancy - pre-eclampsia**
  There is no evidence that pre-eclampsia is caused by emotional stress, working too hard or not getting enough rest...

• **Lupus and pregnancy**
  Lupus can be controlled with medications, so the majority of affected women are able to have children...

• **HIV and women – having children**
  Women living with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), or women whose partner is HIV-positive, may wish to have children but feel concerned about the risk of transmission of the virus to themselves (if...

• **Alcohol and pregnancy**
  There’s no safe level of alcohol use during pregnancy. It’s safest to not drink at all during pregnancy, when trying to conceive, and while breastfeeding...

• **Pregnancy and smoking**
  Smoking while pregnant exposes a woman and her unborn child to an increased risk of health problems...

• **Pregnancy - obstetric emergencies**
  An obstetric emergency may arise when a woman is pregnant, or during her delivery. In this case, extra care is needed. A woman may need a lot of tests and treatments, and extended hospital stays. She...

• **Postnatal depression (PND)**
  Postnatal depression can happen either a few days or weeks after the birth, with a slow or sudden onset...

• **Molar pregnancy**
  Most molar pregnancies are diagnosed when bleeding early in pregnancy prompts an ultrasound scan...

• **Miscarriage**
  A range of feelings is normal after a miscarriage, and they often linger for some time...

• **Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD)**
  The World Health Organization recommends that pregnant women should avoid alcohol...

• **Asthma - pregnancy and breastfeeding**
  Pregnant women with asthma need to continue to take their asthma medication as it is important to the health of both mother and baby that the mother's asthma is well managed...

• **Pregnancy and diet**
  Good nutrition during pregnancy can help to keep you and your developing baby healthy...

• **Birth defects explained**
  The cause of birth defects is often unknown, speak to your GP if you are at increased risk of having a baby with a congenital anomaly...

• **Ectopic pregnancy**
  Ectopic pregnancy is caused by a fertilised egg not being able to move through the fallopian tube...

• **Diabetes - gestational**
  Gestational diabetes is diabetes that occurs during pregnancy and usually disappears when the pregnancy is over...

• **Melissa's story (video)**
  Melissa shares her story of how her baby caught chickenpox at 5 weeks old...

Preparing for birth
• Pregnancy - care choices
  It's very important for you and your baby to be looked after from the start of your pregnancy until after the birth of your baby...

• Pregnancy - labour
  Labour is divided into three stages. The first stage is dilation of the cervix from 0 to 10 cm, the second stage is birth of the baby, and the third stage is delivery of the placenta. Labour typically...

• Pregnancy - premature labour
  Sometimes, babies arrive early. It's important to recognise premature labour, in case you and your baby need medical care...

• Pregnancy - packing for hospital
  Packing for hospital is an exciting part of preparing for the birth of your baby...

• Planning for labour and birth
  Some of the signs and symptoms of going into labour may include period-like cramps, backache, diarrhoea and contractions...

• Twins - identical and fraternal
  Multiple births are more common due to the advancing average age of mothers and the rise in assisted reproductive techniques...

Preparing for a newborn

• Breastfeeding - the first days
  Let your baby feed as much as they want in the first few days to help establish good breastfeeding patterns...

• Breastfeeding - when to start
  Breastfeeding within the first hour after birth allows your baby to behave instinctively and breastfeed with little intervention...

• Alcohol and pregnancy
  There's no safe level of alcohol use during pregnancy. It's safest to not drink at all during pregnancy, when trying to conceive, and while breastfeeding...

• Vitamin K and newborn babies
  With low levels of vitamin K, some babies can have severe bleeding into the brain, causing significant brain damage...

• Postnatal depression (PND)
  Postnatal depression can happen either a few days or weeks after the birth, with a slow or sudden onset...

• Baby furniture - safety tips
  Even if your baby furniture meets every safety standard and recommendation, your child still needs close supervision...

• Newborn bloodspot screening
  Every newborn baby in Australia is offered a newborn bloodspot screening test to identify those at risk of rare, but serious, medical conditions...

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