

# Physical activity during pregnancy

Information for women



You may have heard that pregnancy is a time to take it easy, but in fact, if your pregnancy is uncomplicated, it is healthier for you and your baby if you remain active.

Being physically active during pregnancy increases the blood supply and nutrients to your unborn baby. There is evidence that shows the babies of mothers who have exercised regularly throughout pregnancy cope better with the stress of labour.

Being active will help ease common discomforts that can be associated with pregnancy, such as backache, pelvic pain and constipation, as well as improving the quality of your sleep. Being fitter will also increase your stamina, which means you will have more energy for labour as well as being a new mum.

Recent research has shown women who are physically active during their pregnancy are less likely to develop a number of pregnancy complications, such as gestational diabetes mellitus and pre-eclampsia. Physical activity will also help you control the amount of weight you gain during your pregnancy.

Physically active pregnant women are more likely to go into labour naturally and have a successful vaginal delivery. There is also evidence that shows a reduced need for medical interventions, such as a Caesarean section.

The amount of activity you should do during your pregnancy depends on how active you were before you got pregnant and any health issues you may have.

## I did little or no exercise before becoming pregnant – what kind of activity should I take up?

Even if you did little or no exercise before pregnancy it is important to try and be active every day, if you can. You will begin to notice you feel better, even with small changes to the amount of activity you do. Your goal should be to try and start with 15 minutes of activity at least three times a week.

You don't have to do 15 minutes all at once, but try and aim to be active every day. This could be as simple as walking to your local shops, rather than driving or catching the bus, or climbing stairs instead of using the lift. The main goal is to include activities each day that make your heart beat faster.

Try to gradually build your activity up to around 30 minutes at least five times a week, and every day if you can. If you can't manage this though, don't worry. Any amount of activity is better than none.

You don't have to be exhausted by the exercise for it to do you good. The goal should be to improve and maintain your fitness level, not train for a marathon for the first time!

## I exercised regularly before pregnancy – can I carry on with what I was doing?

Your aim should be to maintain your fitness level during your pregnancy. It is generally safe to continue with your activities, with a few exceptions. For example, if you are a runner then it is safe to continue with your usual level of training, and if you attended classes such as aerobics, body conditioning or Zumba you can also carry on. It is a good idea, however, to tell your instructor you are pregnant, so they can make adaptations to exercises for you, if needed.

You should use your common sense when deciding whether an activity is safe for you to continue during pregnancy. Try and avoid activities that could cause an impact to your stomach. If you are not sure, please always check with your midwife or GP.

## Are there any do's and don'ts for the different stages of pregnancy?

### **First Trimester – Weeks 1 to 12**

- If you are new to exercise, begin gently and build up. Walking every day is a good place to start. Begin with just 15 minutes at least three days a week and build this up gradually to 30 minutes, as you begin to feel stronger. Even maintaining this activity level throughout pregnancy will make a difference to how you feel if you were not very active before.
- Don't exercise in very hot conditions.
- Stay hydrated and drink water regularly.
- Avoid any activity throughout pregnancy where you may bump your bump!

### **Second Trimester – Weeks 13-28**

- Make sure you can hold a conversation during activities. Being breathless when you talk means you are working too hard.

- Don't lie on your back for longer than a few minutes, as this reduces blood flow to your lower body and womb.
- Avoid stomach crunches or curls.
- This is a great time to build up your activity level if you can. Think about including gentle swimming, dancing or even a Zumba class! Ask your midwife for suitable activities in your area, and always tell the instructor you are pregnant.
- Think about including a pregnancy Yoga or Pilates class into your weekly activities if possible. Although these do not raise your heartbeat they are a great way to strengthen muscles and ease pregnancy related aches and pains.

### **Third Trimester – Weeks 29 to 42**

- Listen to your body – if it feels good keep going! If it starts to feel uncomfortable stop or ask for advice on ways to adapt what you are doing so you can keep going for longer.
- In the gym, cycling and rowing are gentle on your bump.
- This is a great time for swimming and aquarobics, as water helps take the weight off your bump and helps ease tired muscles. It may also help you sleep!

My care is being managed by a doctor as I have a medical condition – should I still try and be physically active?

Most medical conditions will be helped by you becoming or remaining physically active during pregnancy, but it is always a good idea to check with your GP before you begin a new activity. Always start slowly, with 15 minutes of walking three times a week. Build this up gradually if you can and if advised by your medical practitioner.

## What are the danger signs which mean I should stop or seek medical help?

If you experience any of the following symptoms either during or after exercise, please contact us for urgent medical advice:

Maternity Assessment Unit, John Radcliffe Hospital

Tel: **01865 220 221**

- chest pain or palpitations
- dizziness
- painful contractions
- if you think your waters have broken
- vaginal bleeding
- excessive tiredness
- abdominal pain, particularly in your back or pubic area
- pelvic girdle pain
- your babies movements reduce
- breathlessness before exertion (after standing, walking or climbing the stairs)
- severe headache
- muscle weakness
- calf pain or swelling.

## Further advice

### **Here for Health – Health Improvement Advice Centre**

Oxford University Hospital drop-in centre for advice and support on healthy living, including physical activity, diet, smoking, alcohol and emotional wellbeing. Based at the John Radcliffe Hospital, in Blue Outpatients on Level 2.

Tel: **01865 221 429**

(Monday to Friday, 9.00am to 5.00pm)

Email: [hereforhealth@ouh.nhs.uk](mailto:hereforhealth@ouh.nhs.uk)

Website: [www.ouh.nhs.uk/HereforHealth](http://www.ouh.nhs.uk/HereforHealth)

If you have a specific requirement, need an interpreter, a document in Easy Read, another language, large print, Braille or audio version, please call **01865 221 473** or email **[PALS@ouh.nhs.uk](mailto:PALS@ouh.nhs.uk)**

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