

Exercise During Pregnancy

Exercise is a key part of staying healthy. Everyone needs daily physical activity—including pregnant women. Getting regular exercise during pregnancy benefits both you and your growing baby and has few risks. If your pregnancy is healthy, you can do most types of exercise, but you may need to make a few changes.

This pamphlet explains

- the benefits of exercise during pregnancy and how to get started
- the latest guidelines for physical activity
- precautions to take
- safe exercises for pregnant women
- exercises to avoid
- exercising after the baby is born

Benefits of Exercise

Regular exercise during pregnancy benefits you and your baby in these key ways:

- Reduces back pain
- Eases constipation
- May decrease your risk of *gestational diabetes*, *preeclampsia*, and *cesarean delivery*
- Promotes healthy weight gain during pregnancy
- Improves your overall general fitness and strengthens your heart and blood vessels
- Helps you to lose the baby weight after your baby is born

If you have never exercised before, pregnancy is a great time to begin. Regular physical activity during pregnancy can start you on a path toward a healthier lifestyle for the rest of your life. You also will set a good example for your family about the importance of staying active.

Before You Start

If you are healthy and your pregnancy is normal, it is safe to continue or start regular physical activity. Physical activity does not increase your chances of miscarriage, low birth weight, or early delivery. However, it is important to discuss exercise with your *obstetrician* or

other member of your health care team during your early prenatal visits. Women with the following conditions or pregnancy *complications* should not exercise during pregnancy:

- Certain types of heart and lung diseases
- *Cervical insufficiency or cerclage*
- Being pregnant with twins or triplets (or more) with risk factors for *preterm* labor
- *Placenta previa* after 26 weeks of pregnancy
- Preterm labor during this pregnancy or ruptured membranes (your water has broken)
- Preeclampsia or pregnancy-induced high blood pressure
- Severe *anemia*

If your obstetrician gives you the OK to exercise, discuss the specific sports or activities that interest you. The two of you can work together to decide on an exercise routine that fits your needs and is safe during pregnancy.

Guidelines for Physical Activity During Pregnancy

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend that pregnant women get at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity every week. An aerobic activity is one in which you move large muscles of the body (like those in the legs and arms) in a rhythmic way. Moderate-intensity means you are moving enough to raise your heart rate and start sweating. You still can talk normally, but you cannot sing.

Examples of moderate-intensity aerobic activity include brisk walking and general gardening (raking, weeding, or digging). 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. For example, you could go for three 10-minute walks each day.

If you are new to exercise, start out slowly and gradually increase your activity. Begin with as little as 5 minutes a day. Add 5 minutes each week until you can stay active for 30 minutes a day.

If you were very active before pregnancy, you can keep doing the same workouts with your obstetrician's approval. Keep in mind that this type of high-intensity exercise can lead to weight loss. If you are losing weight, you may need to increase the number of calories that you eat.

Exercising Safely

Your body goes through many changes during pregnancy. It is important to choose exercises that take these changes into account:

- **Joints**—The *hormones* made during pregnancy cause the ligaments that support your joints to become relaxed. This makes the joints more mobile and at risk of injury. Avoid jerky, bouncy, or high-impact motions that can increase your risk of being hurt.

- **Balance**—During pregnancy, the extra weight in the front of your body shifts your center of gravity. This places stress on joints and muscles, especially those in your pelvis and lower back. Because you are less stable and more likely to lose your balance, you are at greater risk of falling.
- **Breathing**—When you exercise, *oxygen* and blood flow are directed to your muscles and away from other areas of your body. While you are pregnant, your need for oxygen increases, even when you are at rest. As your belly grows, you may become short of breath more easily because of increased pressure of the *uterus* on the diaphragm (a muscle that aids in breathing). These changes may affect your ability to do strenuous exercise, especially if you are overweight or obese.

Additional Precautions

There are a few other precautions that pregnant women should keep in mind during exercise:

- Drink plenty of water before, during, and after your workout. When you exercise, you lose water from your body through sweating. You need to replace the water that is lost to avoid *dehydration*. Signs of dehydration include dizziness, a racing or pounding heart, and urinating only small amounts or having urine that is dark yellow.
- Wear a sports bra that gives lots of support to help protect your breasts. Later in pregnancy, a belly support belt may reduce discomfort while walking or running.
- Avoid becoming overheated, especially in the first trimester. Some research shows a link between heat exposure from sources such as hot tubs, saunas, or fever during pregnancy and an increased risk of *neural tube defects*, but other research does not show a link. To be on the safe side while working out, drink plenty of water, wear loose-fitting clothing, and exercise in a temperature-controlled room. Do not exercise outside when it is very hot or humid. Avoid "hot yoga" and "hot Pilates" during pregnancy.

Warning Signs

Stop exercising and call your obstetrician or other member of your health care team if you have any of these signs or symptoms:

- Bleeding from the vagina
- Feeling dizzy or faint
- Shortness of breath before starting exercise
- Chest pain
- Headache
- Muscle weakness
- Calf pain or swelling
- Regular, painful contractions of the uterus
- Fluid leaking from the vagina

- Avoid standing still or lying flat on your back as much as possible. When you lie on your back, your uterus presses on a large vein that returns blood to the heart. Standing motionless can cause blood to pool in your legs and feet. Both of these positions can decrease the amount of blood returning to your heart and may cause your blood pressure to decrease for a short time.

Always listen to your body. If you get tired or winded, stop exercising. And if you have any of the warning signs listed in the box, contact a member of your health care team right away.

Safe Exercises During Pregnancy

Whether you are new to exercise or it already is part of your weekly routine, choose activities that experts agree are safest for pregnant women:

- Walking—Brisk walking gives a total body workout and is easy on the joints and muscles.
- Swimming and water workouts—Water workouts use many of the body's muscles. The water supports your weight so you avoid injury and muscle strain. If you find brisk walking difficult because of low back pain, water exercise is a good way to stay active.
- Stationary bicycling—Because your growing belly can affect your balance and make you more prone to falls, riding a standard bicycle during pregnancy can be risky. Cycling on a stationary bike is a better choice. Spinning classes offered at local gyms give a good aerobic workout set to music.
- Modified yoga and modified Pilates—Yoga reduces stress, improves flexibility, and encourages stretching and focused breathing. There are even prenatal yoga and Pilates classes designed for pregnant women. These classes often teach modified poses that accommodate a pregnant woman's shifting balance. You also should avoid poses that require you to be still or lie on your back for long periods.

If you are an experienced runner, jogger, or racquet-sports player, you may be able to keep doing these activities during pregnancy. Discuss these activities with your obstetrician or other member of your health care team. Try to avoid any racquet sport in which you need to move and pivot quickly. Your risk of falling is increased because of the changes in your balance that occur during pregnancy.

Exercises to Avoid

Some types of exercise involve positions and movements that may be uncomfortable or harmful. While pregnant, do not do any activity that puts you at increased risk of injury, such as the following:

- Contact sports and sports that put you at risk of getting hit in the abdomen, including ice hockey, boxing, soccer, and basketball

Kegel Exercises

In the coming months, your growing uterus will put more pressure on your *bladder*. Even if your bladder is empty, it may feel like it is full. The weight of your uterus on your bladder may even cause you to leak a little urine when you sneeze or laugh. Doing Kegel exercises can help improve bladder control. Here is how they are done:

- Squeeze the muscles that you use to stop the flow of urine.
- Hold this squeeze for 10 seconds and release.

Do this 10–20 times in a row at least three times per day. You can do Kegel exercises anywhere—while working, driving in your car, or watching television (do not do them when urinating).

- Skydiving
- Activities that may result in a fall, such as downhill snow skiing, water skiing, surfing, off-road cycling, gymnastics, and horseback riding
- "Hot yoga" or "hot Pilates," which may cause you to become overheated
- Scuba diving
- Activities performed above 6,000 feet (if you do not already live at a high altitude)

Exercising After the Baby Is Born

Exercising after your baby is born may help improve mood and decrease the risk of *deep vein thrombosis*, a condition that can occur more frequently in women in the weeks after childbirth. In addition to these health benefits, exercise after pregnancy can help you lose the extra pounds that you may have gained during pregnancy.

If you had a healthy pregnancy and a normal vaginal delivery, you can start exercising as soon as you feel up to it and your obstetrician gives the OK. It is best to start slowly and gradually build up to 150 minutes a week of physical activity. If you had a cesarean delivery or other complications, it may take you longer to return to a regular exercise routine.

Finally...

Pregnant women who exercise regularly have lower risks of gestational diabetes and excess weight gain. They also have fewer aches, more energy, and better muscle tone. Talk to your obstetrician or other member of your health care team about the best way to start and maintain a healthy exercise routine during your pregnancy.

Exercises to Try During Pregnancy

1. 4-Point Kneeling

Strengthens and tones the abdominal muscles.

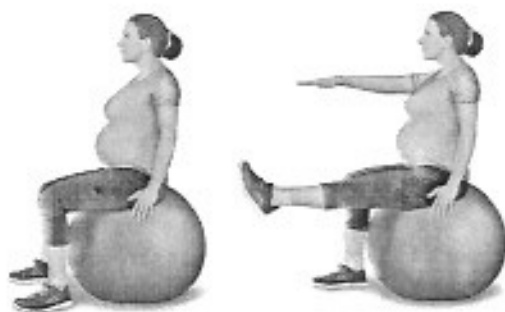
- Kneel on all fours. Make sure that your hips are positioned directly over your knees and your shoulders are positioned directly over your hands. Your back should be straight, not curved upward or downward.
- Inhale deeply, and then exhale. As you exhale, pull your abdominal muscles in. Imagine that you are pulling your belly button inward up to your spine. Breathe normally; do not hold your breath. Make sure your back stays straight. This is called "engaging" your abdominal muscles.
- Return to the starting position and repeat five times.



2. Seated Ball Balance

Strengthens abdominal muscles; helps with balance and stability.

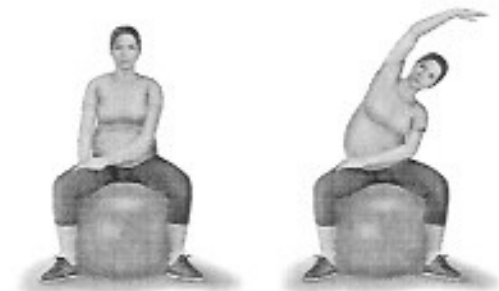
- Sit on the center of the ball, keeping your spine in a neutral position. Your feet should be flat on the floor, about hips-width apart.
- Engage your abdominal muscles by imagining that you are pulling your belly button inward to your spine. Your tailbone (coccyx) should relax. Do not hold your breath. Your arms should be relaxed.
- Raise the left foot off the ground by extending your knee. At the same time, raise your right arm. Hold for a few seconds.
- Return to the starting position. Alternate four to six times.



3. Seated Side Stretch

Eases tension on the side of your body; stretches your hip muscles.

- Sit up tall on the center of the ball, keeping your spine in a neutral position and your abdominals engaged. Your feet should be flat on the floor, about hips-width apart. Put your left hand on the right knee.
- Raise your right arm and bend it toward your left side until you feel a gentle stretch. Breathe normally. Do not hunch down or round your shoulders. Hold the stretch for a few seconds.
- Return to the starting position. Alternate four to six times.



4. Seated Overhead Triceps Extension

Stretches and strengthens the triceps (upper arm muscle) and chest muscles; works abdominal muscles and hip muscles.

- Sit on the center of the ball, keeping your spine in a neutral position and your abdominals engaged. Your feet should be flat on the floor, about hips-width apart.
- Hold the resistance band in your right hand and raise your arm, then bend it at the elbow.
- Reach your left hand behind your back and hold the other end of the resistance band at the back of your waist.
- With your elbow close to your head, raise and lower your right arm by bending the elbow. Keep the other end of the resistance band anchored behind your waist. Return and repeat four to six times.
- Return to starting position. Then repeat with the opposite side.



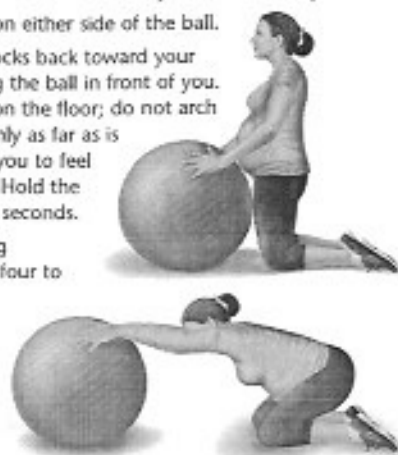
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Exercises to Try During Pregnancy (continued)

5. Ball Shoulder Stretch

Stretches the upper back, arms, and shoulders.

- Kneel on the floor with the stability ball in front of you.
- Put your hands on either side of the ball.
- Move your buttocks back toward your hips while rolling the ball in front of you. Keep your eyes on the floor; do not arch your neck. Go only as far as is comfortable for you to feel a gentle stretch. Hold the stretch for a few seconds.
- Return to starting position. Repeat four to six times.



6. Ball Wall Squat

Strengthens muscles in the legs and buttocks.

- Place the exercise ball against a wall. Stand and firmly press the ball into the wall using your low back.
- Distribute your weight between both feet. With a slow, controlled movement, squat down while firmly pressing against the ball. Do not let your knees collapse inward. Keep your feet flat, and avoid lifting your heels. Maintain an open chest and avoid rounding your shoulders.
- Start with squatting halfway if you cannot squat all the way down. Caution: If you have any knee pain, do not do this exercise.
- Repeat four to six times, working up to 10–12 times.



7. Kneeling Heel Touch

Tones muscles of the upper and lower back; tones abdominals; stretches arm muscles.

- Kneel on an exercise mat.
- Using a slow, controlled movement, rotate your torso to the right. Bring your right hand back and touch your left heel. Extend your left arm above your head for balance.
- Exhale when you reach back. Rotate the trunk to look back at your foot to increase the rotation. Avoid tensing your buttocks or hunching your shoulders, which will hinder your movement.
- Return to the starting position. Alternate four to six times.
- For a slightly easier start, you can place a yoga block next to each ankle, and aim to touch them instead of your heels.



Tips for Buying Equipment

Tips for buying an exercise ball

With a correctly sized (and fully inflated) ball, you should be able to sit on the ball with your feet flat on the floor, your knees bent at a 90-degree angle. Your knees should be level or slightly below your waist. If you are unsure about your stability, go with a larger size ball that is slightly underinflated. You also can place the ball against a wall for additional balance if needed.

Tips for buying a resistance band

These bands come in a variety of colors and vary by vendor. For use during pregnancy, choose a light-to-medium resistance.

Glossary

Anemia: Abnormally low levels of blood or red blood cells in the bloodstream. Most cases are caused by iron deficiency, or lack of iron.

Bladder: A muscular organ in which urine is stored.

Cerclage: A procedure in which the cervical opening is closed with stitches in order to prevent or delay preterm birth.

Cervical Insufficiency: Inability of the cervix to retain a pregnancy in the second trimester.

Cesarean Delivery: Delivery of a baby through surgical incisions made in the mother's abdomen and uterus.

Complications: Diseases or conditions that occur as a result of another disease or condition. An example is pneumonia that occurs as a result of the flu. A complication also can occur as a result of a condition, such as pregnancy. An example of a pregnancy complication is preterm labor.

Deep Vein Thrombosis: A condition in which a blood clot forms in a vein in the leg or other area of the body.

Dehydration: A condition that results from loss of water from the body.

Gestational Diabetes: Diabetes that arises during pregnancy.

Hormones: Substances made in the body by cells or organs that control the function of other cells or organs. An example is estrogen, which controls the function of female reproductive organs.

Neural Tube Defects: A birth defect that results from incomplete development of the brain, spinal cord, or their coverings.

Obstetrician: A physician who specializes in caring for women during pregnancy, labor, and the postpartum period.

Oxygen: A gas that is necessary to sustain life.

Placenta Previa: A condition in which the placenta lies very low in the uterus, so that the opening of the uterus is partially or completely covered.

Preeclampsia: A disorder that can occur during pregnancy or after childbirth in which there is high blood pressure and other signs of organ injury, such as an abnormal amount of protein in the urine, a low number of platelets, abnormal kidney or liver function, pain over the upper abdomen, fluid in the lungs, or a severe headache or changes in vision.

Preterm: Born before 37 completed weeks of pregnancy.

Uterus: A muscular organ located in the female pelvis that contains and nourishes the developing fetus during pregnancy.

This Patient Education Pamphlet was developed by the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. Designed as an aid to patients, it sets forth current information and opinions on subjects related to women's health. The average readability level of the series, based on the Fry formula, is grade 6-8. The Suitability Assessment of Materials (SAM) instrument rates the pamphlets as "superior." To ensure the information is current and accurate, the pamphlets are reviewed every 18 months. The information in this pamphlet does not dictate an exclusive course of treatment or procedure to be followed and should not be construed as excluding other acceptable methods of practice. Variations, taking into account the needs of the individual patient, resources, and limitations unique to the institution or type of practice, may be appropriate.

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The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists
409 12th Street, SW
PO Box 96920
Washington, DC 20090-6920