



A FIT AND HEALTHY PREGNANCY

By Natalia Dvorak, MD

Photos: Gerald Pope, istockphoto.com

Pregnancy is a special time in the lives of many women, and maintaining physical fitness during this time (as well as during the postpartum period) is important for both physical and mental well-being. Physical activity in pregnancy has been shown to reduce the risk of gestational diabetes and disorders of high blood pressure. It also decreases anxiety and depression, improves posture, reduces back pain, improves sleep, and decreases the chance of needing a cesarean section.

Exercise is also critical to limiting the amount of weight gain in pregnancy. Most women have a hard time losing all of their pregnancy weight and, after several pregnancies, this accumulated weight gain can feel insurmountable.

How much exercise is appropriate?

Healthy pregnant women should get at least 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous-intensity aerobic physical activity per week. Due to the cardiovascular changes that occur during pregnancy, you cannot use a target heart rate to judge the intensity of the exercise. Instead, use the “talk test.” During moderate-intensity exercise, you should be able to carry on a normal conversation, but during vigorous-intensity exercise you cannot. Furthermore, vigorous-intensity exercise is associated with sweating and heavier or more frequent breathing.

General guidelines

While there are no trimester-specific guidelines, in the first trimester, fatigue and nausea may limit a pregnant woman's ability to exercise, and by the third trimester she may be too uncomfortable to do anything strenuous. However, throughout the entire pregnancy she should do her best to stay active and, if possible, achieve the recommended 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous-intensity aerobic physical activity per week.

If a pregnant woman is starting from minimal physical activity, a reasonable approach is 15 minutes of continuous low-intensity exercise three times per week, and gradually increasing the intensity, frequency, and duration of exercise. On the other hand, women who already do vigorous activity may continue to do so in pregnancy.

Recommended activities

Straight line or stationary activities (such as walking, jogging, swimming or cycling) are all good activities for pregnancy. Activities such as hiking or dancing are okay, as long as the risk of falling is low.



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Pregnant women should also do resistance training/weight lifting twice a week to strengthen the muscles and bones. Using low weights (10 lbs or less) with multiple repetitions is a safe way to maintain muscle tone in pregnancy. Core work and maintaining flexibility is also important.

If group classes are more enjoyable than solo exercise, try BabyRobics, Feel Good Cardio Sculpt, S-T-R-E-T-C-H, Indoor Cycling, PROjam, ZUMBA fitness, or PRObarre. Just let the instructor know you are pregnant to modify any activities as needed. Private Pilates and private yoga classes are also beneficial for improving both pre- and postnatal strength and stamina. During private sessions, one receives much more personalized attention than in a group setting and exercises can be individualized according to one's needs. (Editor's Note: see “Pilates for EveryBODY” on page 22.)

Precautions to take

Because of the increased laxity of the ligaments in pregnancy, care must be taken to prevent joint injury. Care must also be taken to avoid back injury. Finally, exercising should not be done in a prone (or stomach-down) position after the first trimester. This is also the time after which pregnant women should not lie flat on their backs.

What kinds of activities should be avoided?

Activities with a high risk of falling or abdominal trauma. For this reason, gymnastics, horseback riding, downhill or water skiing, racquet sports, and contact group sports should be avoided. Also, activities involving jumping and quick changes in direction should be avoided.

It's also important to avoid dehydration and overheating while pregnant. If you ever feel

dizzy or nauseous, sit or lie down and call for help. Don't exercise alone and, above all, use common sense. Your obstetrician can help guide you on a safe exercise program for your individual pregnancy.

Healthy nutrition

Nutrition also plays a vital part in a fit and healthy pregnancy. Weight gain over what is recommended by your obstetrician can cause problems with the baby, including a large baby and an increased risk of birth trauma. It also increases the risk of childhood obesity.

Meet with a Registered Dietitian during your pregnancy to make sure you're getting a proper diet. The dietitian can also help monitor your weight gain during the pregnancy and keep you accountable.



MEET THE EXPERT

Dr. Natalia Dvorak is board-certified in Obstetrics and Gynecology (medparkobgyn.com). Her special interests include infertility, adolescent medicine, and high risk obstetrics. She specializes in minimally invasive surgical techniques. She's committed to providing personalized care and maintaining long-term relationships with her patients.