



# Exercise During Pregnancy

Pregnant? Congratulations! If you are curious about whether or not you'll be able to work out during pregnancy, there's good news: research suggests that during pregnancy, women can continue to derive health benefits from regular exercise (at least three times per week).

What types of activity are beneficial and what precautions should you take? Catherine Logan, MSPT, a licensed physical therapist, Pilates instructor and personal trainer in Boston, offers general suggestions for exercising during this exciting time. Your doctor can answer any specific questions about what to keep in mind and what to avoid for your particular pregnancy.

## Why Work Out Now

Consistent exercise will help you as you prepare for childbirth and, later, as you return to prepregnancy activity levels. Benefits of regular exercise during and after pregnancy include the following:

- reduced incidence of back pain
- boosted energy
- fewer problems with constipation
- increased muscle strength and a superior cardiovascular condition, which can facilitate labor and delivery
- improved endurance, to prepare for the possibility of a longer labor
- improved mood states
- reduced postpartum recovery time

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## Modes and Intensity of Exercise

The appropriate mode of exercise for you depends to a great extent on how fit you were before your pregnancy. If you have not been exercising, begin slowly and progress gradually. Swimming and other types of aquatic exercise are preferred because they provide the benefit of buoyancy, taking weight off the joints and allowing you to feel more comfortable. Other possibilities include yoga and Pilates (geared to pregnant clients), walking, or exercise on cardiovascular machines. Performing a mix of cardiovascular, strength and flexibility exercises is an option. The "talk test" is useful for determining intensity. If you cannot hold a conversation while exercising, your intensity is too high.

## Resistance Training

If you have been strength training regularly prior to your pregnancy, you can continue but should reduce intensity and change positions when necessary; for example, by using the seated leg curl machine instead of performing a prone hamstring curl. In addition to the general exercise guidelines outlined in this article, you should

- always breathe through exercises;
- be cautious of rapid positional changes, including bending over quickly with the head below chest level, since these movements may cause dizziness; and
- aim for maintenance, not increasing muscle size.

## general guidelines

According to the guidelines from the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, a woman who does not have any specific risk factors for adverse maternal or perinatal outcomes can exercise throughout her pregnancy if she takes these precautions:

- Avoids exercise in the supine position after the first trimester, since this position can lead to a reduction of maternal heart rate and decrease the flow of oxygenated blood to the baby.
- Avoids prolonged periods of motionless standing.
- Listens to her body. As the pregnancy progresses, there is less room for lung expansion, and the pregnant exerciser may "run out of breath" more quickly. Realizing that decreased oxygen is available, she should modify her exercise intensity and stop when fatigued.
- Chooses activities that minimize the loss of balance. The pregnant woman's changing body affects her center of gravity, so it is best to avoid single-leg movements and exercise on uneven surfaces. Non-weight-bearing exercises, such as indoor cycling or swimming, minimize the risk of injury.
- Avoids any type of exercise that carries the potential for even mild abdominal trauma (e.g., downhill skiing, contact sports).
- Consumes an adequate diet. During pregnancy an extra 300 additional kilocalories per day are required.
- Ensures adequate hydration, appropriate clothing and optimal environmental surroundings during exercise to augment heat dissipation, especially during the first trimester.