

Pregnancy and Postnatal Exercise

Jen Walmsley explores how you can keep fit both before and after your baby arrives.

Exercise during pregnancy

Just when you were starting to think that being pregnant was a great excuse to put your feet up for nine months, it turns out that exercise can be beneficial in ways you'll never even have thought of.

It's generally believed that the fitter you are for labour, the better. If you're hoping for a natural labour, for example, where you're likely to be doing lots of squatting, then having strong thigh muscles should help. Other benefits of exercising in pregnancy include helping reduce the dreaded puffy hands and ankles. Sally Murray, women's health physiotherapist, says "when you are pregnant, you have a lot more blood circulating around your body and the arteries don't contract blood back up to the heart as efficiently. Exercise helps with circulation, as well as mobility in general." It can also help you relax and sleep better.

But what kind of exercise should you be doing and how much? **Here are some tips from the experts to get you on the right track.**

1. Pick something you enjoy

That way you're more likely to stick at it. "As far as exercise in pregnancy goes, it's all about enjoyment," says Murray.

2. Adapt your usual exercise routine for pregnancy

"The key to successful exercise during pregnancy is 'maintenance'," according to Jacqui O'Shea, a specialist pregnancy and postnatal trainer. If you're a regular exerciser, then you can do much of what you did before but, for example, switch from running to fast walking on a treadmill or using a cross-trainer.

If you did nothing at all before you were pregnant, you can start a routine but the rule is that you need to be able to speak in normal sentences while exercising.

Whatever your levels of fitness, you need to take care not to raise your core temperature through exercise, as this can be dangerous for the developing baby. "Comfort is key throughout," O'Shea says. "It is also important to include exercises that help overcome the common postural changes that can occur to the muscles of the core, upper back and hips."



General guidelines for each trimester include:

First (0 to 12 weeks): If you were previously active, continue your exercise programme. If you were previously inactive, consult with a fitness professional on the best approach.

Second (13 to 27 weeks): Maintain your exercise programme. As the baby leaves the protection of the pelvis, activities that could result in abdominal trauma should be avoided.

Third (28 weeks to delivery): Do not lie on your back for more than 30 seconds. Listen closely to your body and try to continue with your second trimester programme and 'functional' movement.

3. But take sensible precautions

Many women continue skiing, cycling or running almost until their due date. "Physiologically there's no real reason to stop, but it's really about safety," says Murray. Your level of experience is one factor to take into account. But many women would prefer to sacrifice some enjoyment in the short term, rather than run the risk of a fall. And from personal experience, running is pretty hard work after about seven months!

Murray recommends avoiding any exercises causing asymmetry (eg standing on one leg and moving or launching other one). Kick-boxing is also an obvious no no, as is squash, which involves lunging movements. And if you have a history of miscarriages, then experts recommend that you do nothing other than gentle swimming or walking.

4. Even if you feel exhausted, try to make time for exercise

"Our bodies are designed to move and will appreciate even the smallest amount of movement during energy slumps," says O'Shea. "Create a list of reasons why you should exercise and schedule the sessions into your diary."

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Postnatal exercise

1. There's no such thing as too soon

“Pelvic floor exercises should be commenced straight after delivery,” says O’Shea. Gentle walking is also okay as soon as you feel up to it. Murray suggests focusing on your posture at this stage too. During pregnancy, most women find that their posture changes dramatically, so it’s helpful to try to correct it by doing exercises like calf and pectoral muscle stretches, pelvic floor exercises and tilts.

If you only manage one exercise, make it this one...

Most of us are guilty of not paying enough attention to our pelvic floor muscles, often because we’re not really sure where these are and how to exercise them. Your pelvic floor is a strip of muscle that goes from the pubic bone at the front of your pelvis to your coccyx (base of the spine) at the back. It has three holes in it, the one you wee through, the vagina and the back passage. The aim of a pelvic floor squeeze is to close those three holes...simple.

Try these cues to see which gives you the best contraction;

1. Squeeze the pubic and coccyx bones together and then lift up towards the belly button
2. Imagine you are squeezing the water out of a soggy tampon (sounds gross but it works!)
3. Try to imagine you are stopping yourself passing water and wind at the same time

Once you have found your cue, hold for five seconds, relax completely and repeat ten times. Increase the length of time you can hold the contraction as you get stronger. Be aware pelvic floor exercises are easiest lying down and hardest standing up (due to gravity).

2. But give yourself a little more time before doing anything more strenuous

The general rule is that exercise can be resumed six weeks after a vaginal delivery and ten weeks after a caesarean. If you exercised at a relatively high intensity previously and know what you are

doing, then you can probably strap on two or three sports bras and get going without doing yourself too much damage says Murray. However she warns that you need to be aware of impact and any recurrent strains – the hormone relaxin causes muscles to be more flexible than usual during pregnancy and in the early postnatal days.

3. Every little counts (especially when you have a newborn)

“Bite-sized pieces is my mantra,” says Murray. “Just tell yourself you’ll do five minutes, because it’s much better to do that every day, than not do anything at all.” Interval training can also help to break down a daunting goal, so instead of running for fifteen minutes, walk for a minute, then run for a minute until you get there. Other ways to motivate yourself include paying for classes in advance or setting joint goals with a friend.

4. You don't need always need a babysitter

Buy yourself an exercise DVD with relatively short routines. “My number one tip is to exercise as soon as the baby falls asleep,” says Murray. “Before they go to bed, make sure you are changed, have cleared the lounge and put the DVD in the machine so you don’t waste any time, just in case they wake up early.” There are also exercise classes where you can take your baby along with you – these can be a good way to meet other mums too.

5. Give yourself time to get back to 'normal'

Most experts agree that in the real world it takes nine months to stretch and nine months to get back into shape again.

Further information:

You can contact Sally Murray at Balance Physio (www.balancephysio.com) and Jacqui O’Shea at No More Excuses (www.nomoreexcuses.co.uk) www.buggyfit.co.uk www.powerpramming.co.uk

