

Pregnancy and Exercise: Baby, Let's Move!

During pregnancy, exercise can help you stay in shape and prepare for labor and delivery. Here's the lowdown on pregnancy and exercise, from getting started to staying motivated.

By Mayo Clinic staff

Pregnancy seems like a perfect time to sit back and relax. You may feel more tired than usual, your back may ache, and your ankles may be swollen. But guess what? There's more to pregnancy and exercise than skipping it entirely. Unless you're experiencing serious complications, sitting around won't help. In fact, pregnancy can be a great time to get active — even if you haven't exercised in a while.

Exercise can help ease or even prevent discomfort, boost your energy level and improve your overall health. Exercise also helps you prepare for labor by increasing your stamina and muscle strength. Being in good shape may even shorten your labor and speed your recovery.

Getting the OK

Before you begin an exercise program, make sure you have your health care provider's OK. Although exercise during pregnancy is generally good for both mother and baby, you'll need to proceed with caution if you have a history of preterm labor or certain medical conditions, including:

- Diabetes
- High blood pressure
- Heart disease
- Placenta previa, a problem with the placenta that can cause excessive bleeding before or during delivery

Pacing it for Pregnancy

For most pregnant women, at least 30 minutes of moderate exercise is recommended on most, if not all, days of the week. But even shorter or less frequent workouts can help you stay in shape and prepare for labor.

Walking is a great exercise for beginners. It provides moderate aerobic conditioning with minimal stress on your joints. Other good choices include swimming, rowing and cycling on a stationary bike. Strength training is OK, too, as long as you avoid lifting heavy weights.

If you exercised before pregnancy, you can probably continue to work out at the same level while you're pregnant — as long as you're feeling comfortable and your health care provider says it's OK. If you haven't exercised for a while, begin with as little as five minutes of physical activity a day. Build up to 10 minutes, 15 minutes, and so on, until you reach at least 30 minutes a day.

Remember to stretch before and after each workout. Drink plenty of fluids to stay hydrated, and be careful to avoid overheating. No matter how dedicated you are to being in shape, don't exercise to the point of exhaustion.

Activities to Approach with Care

If you're not sure whether a particular activity is safe during pregnancy, check with your health care provider. Unless you've made special preparations, your health care provider may discourage underwater and high-altitude activities, such as scuba diving and hiking at high altitudes. As your pregnancy progresses, you may need to avoid activities that require you to jump or have a high risk of falling, such as:

- Water skiing
- Downhill skiing
- In-line skating

As you get larger, you're more likely to fall. Although you're not likely to hurt the baby, you may risk joint, bone and muscle injuries.

Staying Motivated

You're more likely to stick with an exercise plan if it involves activities you enjoy and fits into your daily schedule. Consider these simple tips:

- **Start small.** You don't need to join a gym or don expensive workout clothes to get in shape. Just get moving. Try a daily walk through your neighborhood. Vary your route to keep it interesting.
- **Find a partner.** Exercise can be more interesting if you use the time to chat with a friend. Better yet, involve the whole family.
- **Use a headset.** Listen to music or a book while you exercise. Use lively songs to energize your workout.
- **Try a class.** Many fitness centers and hospitals offer classes designed for pregnant women. Choose one that fits your interests and schedule.
- **Get creative.** Don't limit yourself. Consider hiking, rowing or dancing.
- **Give yourself permission to rest.** Your tolerance for strenuous exercise will decrease as your pregnancy progresses.

Listen to Your Body

As important as it is to exercise, it's also important to watch for danger signs. Stop exercising if you notice:

- Blurred vision
- Dizziness
- Nausea
- Fatigue
- Shortness of breath
- Chest pain
- Abdominal pain
- Vaginal bleeding

If you don't feel better quickly after you stop exercising, contact your health care provider.

A Healthy Choice

Regular exercise can help you cope with the physical changes of pregnancy and build stamina for the challenges ahead. If you haven't been exercising regularly, use pregnancy as your motivation to begin.