

Ten Tips for Exercising by Lauri J. Reimer, Pre/Postnatal Exercise Specialist



Exercising Your Way Through a Healthy Pregnancy

"Women who engage in a regular exercise program during pregnancy experience: fewer aches and pains, easier pregnancies, better sleeping patterns and less weight gain. They are also better able to endure the challenges of labor and delivery and regain their prepregnancy shape more quickly." (The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists) The many advantages of exercising throughout pregnancy are apparent not only for the duration of the pregnancy but for labor, birth and postpartum.

A woman who exercises during pregnancy will increase her body awareness helping her to be more sensitive to the changes taking place in her body. Keeping her body conditioned will help her as she prepares for childbirth. An exercise program will also teach her how to relax her body which will improve cooperation for labor and delivery. A consistent exercise program will allow her to have less physical discomforts so she may experience a more positive pregnancy.

The following guidelines will send you on your way to a winning pregnancy!

- 1. If you were not physically active prior to pregnancy, ease into an exercise routine gradually** and monitor your intensity frequently during cardiorespiratory training. New exercisers should work at approximately 60-70% of their maximum heart rate (approx. 18-22 beats in 10 sec.) Fit pregnant women may work out at higher intensity levels as long as it feels comfortable. Remember: pregnancy is not the time to achieve maximum benefits or begin new activities. Expect to tire more easily as your pregnancy progresses; pay attention to your body's signs of fatigue and modify your exercise pace as needed. Your energy may fluctuate from day to day.
- 2. A well-rounded prenatal exercise program should include stretch, strengthening, stability work, cardiorespiratory training and relaxation exercises.** Always begin exercise with low intensity, rhythmic limbering type movements and end it with gentle stretches. Avoid activities which were not performed 8-10 weeks prior to the pregnancy (eg: step, cycling, running, core board, kickboxing, pilates).
- 3. It's ok to continue exercising the abdominal muscles,** however, avoid prolonged backlying (more than 3-4 minutes) after the first trimester, especially if you feel dizzy. Choose alternative positions for abdominal strengthening after that. Pelvic rocks and tail wags, done in a hands-and-knees position, are very effective choices and also help alleviate back stress.

4. **Include pregnancy-specific exercises such as Kegels** to strengthen the pelvic floor muscles. These exercises may be performed as part of your exercise routine or at other times throughout the day. Pregnant women should do a minimum of 10 sets of 10 per day and continue them after giving birth. Begin by contracting and releasing the pelvic floor muscles as if stopping the flow of urine. As the muscles gain strength, try to hold each contraction for longer. Work up to a 10 second hold for each contraction. Include both faster and slower Kegels and 'elevators'.
5. **Include upper back strengthening exercises** to counteract the changes in upper body posture which may occur with the increased weight gain of the enlarging breasts. Many women experience slouching and poor posture resulting in tension in the upper back and shoulders. Continue during postpartum since back problems may continue from the constant lifting and carrying of the newborn, the carseat, and baby's other necessities.
6. **Avoid stretching to maximal resistance.** Stretch only to mild tension to avoid overstretching muscles, ligaments and tendons which are vulnerable from pregnancy hormones such as relaxin. Overstretching could lead to pain and discomfort as well as joint instability problems. Watch this especially during Yoga.
7. **Avoid deep flexion and extension of the joints** such as deep knee bends where hips drop below knee level. An exception may be the Pregnancy Squat, where the woman "squats" in a stationary position as preparation for using this as a position during labor. Also avoid excessive bouncing or jarring movements and rapid directional changes or turns which can place undo stress on joints and pose balance concerns.
8. **Drink plenty of water** before, during and following every exercise session. Active pregnant women should drink approximately 8-10 cups of water per day to maintain proper hydration levels. Dehydration can be harmful and could cause preterm labor. When exercising in water, be sure to have a water bottle close by and drink frequently.
9. **Exercise at least three times per week** to achieve optimum fitness benefits. Normal, healthy pregnant women achieve many benefits from participating in a regular exercise program. This includes shorter, easier labors with less complications, less intervention and reduced chance of Cesarean birth.
10. **Get approval of your exercise program from your obstetrician or primary caregiver.** If any unusual symptoms appear, stop physical activity immediately and contact your doctor.

