

Pregnancy and exercise

There is no doubt about it – pregnancy is physically demanding! Regular exercise is an essential way of helping your body cope with the increased demands on your joints, muscles, heart and lungs.

Benefits of exercise in pregnancy

- Regular exercise (at the right intensity) can help reduce back pain, improve or maintain muscle tone, reduce leg cramps, swelling and constipation, and improve sleep patterns. Women who exercise regularly often feel better about themselves and their changing body during pregnancy.
- As well as improved fitness, women who exercise are less likely to experience fatigue due to improved sleep, are less anxious and experience reduced pain perception and neuromuscular tension.

Dos and don'ts of pregnancy exercise

Every pregnant woman should take special precautions with exercise during pregnancy. To help you with a safe exercise program during your pregnancy, consider the following:

Consult your doctor or midwife

It is important to consult with your doctor or midwife when starting a new exercise program or when continuing with your current exercise program during pregnancy. You should discuss any problems or discomfort to determine if you need to take any special precautions. The type and amount of exercise that you normally do and have done recently will influence the advice given by your doctor or midwife.



Do your pelvic floor exercises

Pelvic floor muscle exercises are essential. Be sure to exercise your pelvic floor muscles before, during and after pregnancy.

Watch your level of intensity

To prevent overheating and reduce your risk of injury, it is recommended that you exercise at an intensity level between 'light' and 'somewhat hard'.

Wear a bra

Wear a good supportive bra while exercising and check your swimwear for support if you are doing water aerobics.

Watch your posture

Aim to maintain correct form and posture during exercise. Brace your abdominal muscles and be aware of your back at all times. Maintain good posture when standing: stand tall, with your abdominal muscles gently drawn in and your shoulders back, and gently drop your chin. Try to maintain this position regularly during the day.

Eat carbohydrates before exercise

Always eat food containing carbohydrates 1–2 hours before exercising, as your blood sugar levels can fluctuate rapidly during pregnancy. Carry juice with you to drink if you feel faint or dizzy. If this occurs, slow down or stop exercising.

Be aware of the effects of pregnancy hormones

Pregnancy hormones soften your joints and ligaments, which may increase the risk of injury during pregnancy. Take care when stretching and avoid contact sports after the first trimester, or on advice of your doctor or midwife.

Do pregnancy abdominal bracing exercises

Stop doing abdominal curls and crunches as soon as you are pregnant. You can do pregnancy abdominal bracing exercises on a regular basis.

Monitor your rectus diastasis

This is the gap between your abdominal muscles that develops during pregnancy. You can decrease the width of this gap by using correct posture, ceasing abdominal curls and crunches, and learning how to do pregnancy abdominal bracing correctly. It is wise to keep a regular check on the width of this gap. If you are unsure of how to do this, your midwife or physiotherapist can check this gap for you.

Do not overheat

Take care not to overheat during pregnancy and avoid becoming dehydrated as this raises your core temperature and could harm your baby. Avoid exercising in high temperatures or high humidity. Choose a cooler time of the day to exercise. Always take a water bottle with you when you exercise, even in a pool, because dehydration can still occur in water. If you are in a group exercise class, position yourself closer to the fan or air-conditioning.

Do not exercise on your back

Avoid lying on your back to exercise after 16 weeks into your pregnancy, or as advised by your doctor or midwife. Choose exercises/stretchches that are done while seated, upright, lying on your side or on your hands and knees.

Ideal exercises during pregnancy (if no complications)

- Walking
- Low impact aerobics
- Water aerobics
- Pregnancy exercise classes
- Cycling (on a stationary bike)
- Swimming
- Light weight training (see your fitness instructor for assistance with your program)



Exercises to avoid during pregnancy

- Heavy weights
- Bouncing – especially star jumps or similar activities
- Contact sports
- Any activities or exercises that cause pain
- Excessive twisting and turning activities
- Exercises that require you to hold your breath
- Exercises that involve standing on one leg for a period of time
- Pushing off with one leg at a time when swimming – try to push off with both feet when you turn at the end of the pool
- Excessive breaststroke at the end of your pregnancy, as this puts stress on your pelvis
- Prolonged standing static exercises e.g. standing still and doing arm weights for a long period of time
- Highly choreographed exercises or those involving sudden changes in direction
- Lifting your hip to the side while kneeling on your hands and knees
- Activities involving sudden changes in intensity
- Exercises that increase the curve in your lower back
- High impact or jerky movements
- Prolonged bouncing, as this can overstretch the pelvic floor muscles

Some exercises may place more pressure on your pelvic floor or on your abdominal wall, causing a separation between your abdominal muscles (see 'Monitor your rectus diastasis', left). If you are unsure, get your technique checked with a continence or fitness professional, particularly when you are doing planks or hovers, and body weight exercises such as dips or pull ups.



Benefits of exercising in water

There are many benefits of exercising in water during pregnancy, outlined below:

- Your body weight is supported during water exercise. This places less stress on joints and ligaments than exercising on land, so there is less chance of joint injury.
- The weight of your uterus is supported, so women experience less abdominal heaviness when exercising in water, especially in the last few months of pregnancy.
- You can exercise right up to your due date, if medical check-ups permit. However, ensure the temperature of the water does not exceed 32 degrees Celsius.
- The pressure of the water helps to improve venous blood flow and this can help to reduce swelling in your lower limbs.
- Exercising in water can be relaxing and help relieve pain.
- You can experience less muscle soreness when exercising in water than after exercising on land.

More tips for exercise during pregnancy

- NOTHING should hurt! Exercise should make you feel good, gently increase your fitness and be fun. If any exercise causes pain, stop it immediately or advise the instructor if you are in a class.
- Exercising in a heated pool can sometimes cause a drop in blood pressure. If you feel dizzy or short of breath, let your instructor know and take a break on the steps. For the same reason, you may want to sit for about five minutes before you race off after a class or swimming.
- Have a rest during exercise if you feel you need one. Remember to work at your own pace and do not compete if you are in a class situation. If you are unable to comfortably talk while exercising, you are probably working too hard. Do not push through pain or fatigue.
- It is important to take more time to warm up and cool down when you are pregnant, to prepare your body for exercise and to prevent blood pooling in your legs or leg cramps.

- Avoid suddenly stopping while exercising as this can cause low blood pressure, light headedness or fainting. If you need to stop exercising, keep your feet moving to help the blood flow back to the heart.
- Do not exercise if you are unwell or extremely fatigued.
- Remember that pain or shortness of breath should not be felt at any time. STOP exercising and seek advice from your doctor or midwife if you experience any of the following:
 - o Dizziness, faintness, headaches, blurred vision, nausea or vomiting
 - o Any kind of pain or numbness
 - o Discomfort or feeling extremely tired after you have exercised
 - o Vaginal bleeding, contractions, leaking amniotic fluid (the water around your baby), or reduced movements of your baby



When can I return to exercise or sport after the birth?

Participating in sport, running or other high impact activities early after childbirth may actually reduce pelvic floor muscle strength and cause long-term bladder and bowel problems or pelvic organ prolapse. You can minimise the risk of these developing with some careful precautions.

The early postnatal period is about rest, recovery and bonding with your new baby. You can start with your pelvic floor exercises and postnatal abdominal muscle bracing during this time.

It is recommended that you wait until your six week postnatal check before increasing your intensity level. Low-impact exercise such as walking is recommended during this time. Aim to increase your distance and speed gradually.

It is important to check with your doctor, midwife or continence professional before returning to exercise.

Read the *Returning to sport or exercise after the birth* fact sheet for more information.

Where to get help

For more information about pelvic floor exercises, pregnancy and postnatal abdominal muscle bracing, and where to get help for pelvic floor problems, go to:

- pelvicfloorfirst.org.au
- thepregnancycentre.com.au

The **National Continence Helpline (1800 33 00 66)** is staffed by Nurse Continence Specialists who provide advice, resources and details for local continence services, products and subsidies. The Helpline is a free and confidential service managed by the Continence Foundation of Australia on behalf of the Australian Government. It is staffed 8am-8pm AEST Monday to Friday.



© Continence Foundation of Australia-The Pregnancy Centre 2021. Reproduced with kind permission from The Pregnancy Centre.

Pelvic Floor First is an initiative of the Continence Foundation of Australia. Supported by funding from the Australian Government under the National Continence Program.