

Exercise in pregnancy

Physiotherapy

There are many benefits to participating in regular exercise during pregnancy. Exercise can positively impact your health as well as the future health of your baby.

REGULAR EXERCISE DURING PREGNANCY HAS BEEN SHOWN TO:

- help your body cope with the added demands on the muscles, joints, heart and lungs
- help reduce back pain, leg cramps, swelling and constipation
- improve body image
- maintain fitness
- prevent excessive weight gain
- be associated with shorter, and less complicated labour
- reduce fatigue through improved quality of sleep
- reduce symptoms of anxiety or depression
- reduce the risk of gestational diabetes mellitus (diabetes occurring during pregnancy) and high blood pressure including pre-eclampsia.
- reduce complications in your newborn baby



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BEFORE STARTING:

It is important to consider a few things –

- your pre-pregnancy level of fitness
- your prior exercise experience
- your current level of fitness
- weeks' gestation
- the climate in which you live

For women classified with a high risk pregnancy or a history of cardiovascular disease, asthma, diabetes, bone or joint problems or obstetric issues, we suggest you talk to your doctor before starting an exercise program.

DURING OR AFTER EXERCISE:

If you experience any of the following during or after exercise, please speak with your doctor or midwife -

- dizziness, faintness, blurred vision, unexplained shortness of breath
- pain or numbness
- extreme tiredness
- vaginal bleeding, contractions, leaking amniotic fluid or reduced movements of your baby

HOW TO EXERCISE DURING PREGNANCY:

Below is a general guide for exercise during pregnancy -

Exercise should feel good, gradually build up your fitness – you should not be experiencing any pain or discomfort.

- **Frequency** - be active on most, preferably all, days each week
- **Intensity** - moderate. Use the 'Talk Test' – exercise to the point of feeling lightly puffed but able to carry out a conversation

If you have a higher level of fitness and are accustomed to regular vigorous exercise, you can generally continue to exercise at your usual level of intensity for much of your pregnancy

- **Duration** - aim for at least 30 minutes at a time; up to 60 minutes if you live in a cool climate

If you haven't previously been very active or feel you are carrying extra weight, we suggest you start exercising very gradually e.g. 5-10 minutes at a time and gradually build up towards 30 minutes per day



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- **Wear** - appropriate clothing and keep hydrated e.g. drink plenty of water

WHAT TYPE OF EXERCISE IS RECOMMENDED?

A combination of low impact, aerobic (cardio) and strengthening exercises is best.

Aerobic options -

- walking - at a 'brisk' pace
- exercise bike - can allow you to work at a higher intensity in the latter stages of pregnancy when walking may become more challenging
- swimming / water based aerobics - particularly good in third trimester when walking can become less comfortable. Pool temperature should ideally be less than 33.4 degrees Celsius when exercising

Strengthening exercises -

- aim for 2 sessions per week, covering the main muscle groups of the body
- no breath holding
- care with or avoid lunges or abdominal crunches/sit ups
- pelvic floor muscle strengthening – see Barwon Health [maternity services website](http://www.barwonhealth.org.au/maternity-services-website)

Other - Yoga / Pilates, prenatal community exercise groups

Be careful with the following activities -

- activities with a risk of falling - the change in centre of gravity and weight distribution can affect balance - i.e. team sports, horse riding, cycling, snow sports
- exercising in heat > 25 degrees Celsius for more than 30 minutes
- exercising whilst lying on your back - not recommended after first trimester, due to risk of reduced blood flow to the baby
- high impact exercise - activities involving jumping or bouncing - may add extra load to your pelvic floor muscles

Be mindful of your pelvic floor muscles - when exercising you should not experience any leaking from your bladder or bowel or heaviness/dragging/aching in the perineal area (the area between your vagina and back passage).

If you get these symptoms during exercise then:

- reduce the volume/intensity or type of exercise to the point where you are no longer experiencing symptoms
- strengthen your pelvic floor muscles
- see a pelvic health physiotherapist



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This resource was developed by the Physiotherapy Department at Barwon Health.
You can contact us on (03) 4215 0826 or ring a member of your health care team if you have any questions or concerns.



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