

Pregnancy & Exercise

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A woman's body goes through many changes during pregnancy and being physically fit can help her adapt to these stresses. Pregnancy brings about structural as well as hormonal changes, both of which affect the stability of joints and can cause postural problems. As a woman's abdomen becomes larger and breasts become heavier, this causes an increase in the curvature of the lumbar spine or low back area. This change often causes fatigue and/or pain in the upper and lower back. Exercise is important to provide proper body alignment and strength to the muscles that support the spine.

As well as exercise, good posture and body mechanics are also important during pregnancy. In late pregnancy women can feel short of breath due to the inability of the diaphragm to fully contract, having good posture can reduce some shortness of breath by allowing more room for the diaphragm to contract. Having good body mechanics is important in preventing injury during pregnancy. Changes in hormonal levels cause connective tissue, ligaments, and cartilage to become lax, which in turn causes joints to become unstable and vulnerable to injury.

When exercising during pregnancy, there are certain considerations and guidelines to follow. Moderate exercise when pregnant is equivalent to vigorous exercise for someone who is not pregnant, and after the fourth month of pregnancy the program should be altered to a mild to moderate safe program. There is no indication that mild to moderate exercise during pregnancy is harmful to fetal growth or development. However, exercise at extreme levels may cause low birth weight. A pregnant woman's heart rate at rest is usually higher and will rise more rapidly during exercise. A rapid increase in either of these during strenuous exercise can divert blood flow away from the uterus and placenta, therefore lessening oxygen supply to the fetus.

The following are some general exercise guidelines during pregnancy. Drinking plenty of fluids before, during, and after exercise keeps you well hydrated. It is important to monitor your heart rate and not exceed 140 beats per minute. Exercise should be done 3-4 times per week for approximately 15 minutes, it is important to warm up and cool down for 5-10 minutes. It is not wise to exercise in hot, humid weather. Gentle stretching should be included, but not taken to the point of maximum resistance. Avoid the supine position after the fourth month of pregnancy due to possible compression of the Vena Cava, which is the vein that carries blood to the back of the heart. Exercise to strengthen the low back muscles, the pelvic area, and abdominal muscles should be included. Due to joint instability, jerky, bouncing motions or rapid change in motion should be avoided.

Although exercise is important and can be beneficial during pregnancy, it needs to be monitored closely. Stop exercise if any unusual symptoms or feelings occur. Symptoms to watch for include discomfort, shortness of breath, abdominal pain, or bleeding. If you have any questions or concerns regarding exercise always consult your physician.