

Guide 7: Exercising When Pregnant

Exercising when pregnant helps weight control and prepares you for the new arrival.



Exercise is beneficial throughout pregnancy, but there are certain ones you should avoid, particularly in the first and third trimesters.

Here is a guide to keeping in tip-top shape at every stage.

Trimester 1

Benefits of exercising

Besides weight control, staying active reduces the risk of developing pregnancy-induced diabetes and hypertension.

Studies also show exercise helps pregnant women manage mental and physical stress which may help reduce the likelihood of colic developing in their babies.

Exercise does not increase the risk of miscarriage nor induce preterm labour.

Seek medical advice nevertheless before starting any exercise programme.

Recommended exercises

If you were generally inactive or sedentary before pregnancy, it is best to start on 15 minutes of daily exercise and gradually increase that to 30 minutes, for five to seven days a week.

If you have always been active however, continue on with your current exercise programme but with exceptions to avoid:

- Contact or competitive sport and other exercise which involves jumping, jarring motions or rapid changes of direction. Examples here are tennis and squash.
- High-impact exercises because they might cause pains in the joints. Examples here are Zumba and running.
- Standing for long periods of time.

How to prepare yourself for exercise

- Drink lots of water before, during and after exercise, to prevent dehydration and overheating.
- Avoid exercising in the sun, and remember to warm up and cool down to prepare the muscles and joints.
- Maintain good posture during exercise to avoid straining the joints.
- Be sure to eat enough of the right amount and appropriate foods to get enough calories and right nutrition to support baby's growth and development.

Stop all exercises immediately and seek medical help if you experience symptoms like vaginal bleeding, nausea, vomiting, feeling light-headed, strong pain (especially in the back or pelvis), reduced baby movement, chest pain or amniotic fluid leakage.

These are some exercises ideal for Trimester 1:

- Walking on the spot
- Ankle pumps
- Wrist extension stretch
- Pelvic tilt — standing

- Half squat

Walking on the spot

- Lift one knee up until your calf and thigh forms a right angle. Lower that leg and repeat with the other leg.
- If you are unable to raise your leg as high, just raise it to a level you are comfortable with.
- Do 10 sets.

Ankle pumps

- Begin by elevating your legs. A good way is to lie on the sofa with your legs on the arm rests.
- In a long sitting position (seated with legs stretched out in front), bend one ankle upwards as if you were pulling your toes towards you. Relax that foot and repeat with the other foot.
- Do 10 sets for each foot.

Wrist extension stretch

- Hold your arm straight out before you.
- With the other hand, collect the fingers and palm of the outstretched arm and pull them back to you in a stretch. Hold this position for 20 seconds and change over.
- Do 10 sets for each arm.

Pelvic tilt — Standing

- Stand straight with feet shoulder-width apart and do not lock your knees.
- Tilt your pelvis back to flatten your back – you should feel your abdominal and buttock muscles tighten when you do this.
- Hold this position for 5 seconds and return to standing.
- Do not hold your breath when doing this exercise.
- Do 10 sets.

Half squat

- Stand straight with feet shoulder-width apart and do not lock your knees.
- Hold your arms out in front of you throughout this exercise.
- Slightly clench your abdominal muscles and lower yourself slowly into a squat. Make sure knees do not go past your toes. Hold position for 5 seconds, and return to standing.
- Breathe regularly throughout these steps.

- Do 10 sets.

Trimester 2

Benefits of exercising

You are likely to feel energetic in the second trimester of pregnancy – a time many women report feeling healthier than they have ever been in their lives.

Recommended exercises

Similar to the advice for Trimester 1, if you have not been exercising regularly before pregnancy, it is recommended you start with 15 minutes of exercise a day and gradually increase to 30 minutes, for five to seven days a week. Such exercises can include walking, stair climbing or light aerobics.

These are some of the exercises ideal for Trimester 2:

- Pelvic tilt in four – Point kneeling
- Pelvic tilt – Standing
- Pelvic rocking
- Half squat
- Side-lying clams

Pelvic tilt in four – Point kneeling

- You need to get down on your hands and knees on a mat for this exercise.
- To be certain of the correct posture for this exercise, when in position on the mat, shoulders must be in line with your hands and hips must be in line with your knees. A mirror wall can help here to check your posture.
- Relax your abdominal muscles and breathe in. Now breathe out, but keep your belly in, and visualise pulling your belly button up towards the spine.
- Tilt back your pelvis to flatten your back further and hold this position for 5 seconds.
- Make sure your lower back is not arched throughout this exercise. Breathe normally.
- Do 10 sets.

Pelvic tilt — Standing

(See Trimester 1)

Pelvic rocking

- Stand straight with feet shoulder-width apart.

- Sway your pelvis side to side but keep your upper body still.
- Do 10 sets.

Half squat

(See Trimester 1)

If you have always been active, it is safe to continue with your current exercise programme. When you become heavier in your pregnancy though, reduce the intensity of them.

Pelvic floor exercises are important to maintain pelvic floor muscle strength to prevent stress, urinary incontinence – and in the future – organ prolapse.

Side-lying clams

- Lie on your side and support your head with one hand.
- Keep your knees bent and suck in your tummy.
- Raise your knee a few inches and lower slowly.
- Do not roll your pelvis forward or back.
- Keep your back straight and breathe normally.
- Repeat 10 times, then lie on your other side.
- Do 10 sets.

Trimester 3

Benefits of exercising

This is the final trimester of your pregnancy and the time when you are even larger with the developing child as the pregnancy comes to term.

Hormonal changes also increase the likelihood of water retention, so you may notice swelling of your arms and legs.

Exercise during this time will help you prepare to meet the physical demands of labour and birth. It also helps control your blood glucose levels and blood pressure.

For precaution, seek medical advice from your obstetrician about these exercises.

As in previous trimesters, if you have not been exercising regularly before pregnancy, start with an easy 15 minutes of activity a day. Then gradually increase this to 30 minutes a day, for five to seven days a week.

These are some of the exercises that are ideal for Trimester 3:

- Calf stretch
- Walking on the spot
- Low impact aerobics

- Pelvic tilt in four–point kneeling

Calf stretch

- Sit on a mat, keeping one leg bent with the foot flat on the floor and pointing forward.
- Loop a towel around the foot of the straightened leg and slowly pull the foot to point towards you.
- Hold the position for 20 seconds and slowly release the towel.
- Repeat this exercise 10 times on each leg.

Walking on the spot

(See Trimester 1)

Pelvic tilt in four–point kneeling

(See Trimester 2)

Pelvic floor exercises are also a great way to maintain the strength of pelvic floor muscles to prevent stress urinary incontinence and in future, organ prolapse.

Here's how you do it:

Imagine that you're trying to stop yourself from passing wind and trying to stop your flow of urine mid–stream at the same time. The feeling is one of "squeeze and lift", closing and drawing up the front and back passages. Hold this position for a few seconds, then release. Do this six to eight times.

Hormonal and postural changes may cause you to develop back pain during this trimester. Back exercises like pelvic tilts can help to alleviate the discomfort.

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Sources:

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