



The do's and don'ts of pregnancy and exercise

It is widely accepted that regular exercise plays an important role in promoting health and wellbeing for pregnant women. Women who exercise during pregnancy tend to have reduced weight gain, more rapid weight loss after pregnancy, improved mood and better sleep patterns. Some studies have also shown a lower induction rate and a faster labour in women who exercise regularly during pregnancy.

It seems nearly everyone has an opinion on what you should and shouldn't do in pregnancy and it can be hard to separate fact from fiction. Below is a list of some of the more important points for you to consider if you are pregnant and wish to continue exercising.

1. If you have been following a regular exercise program prior to your pregnancy, you should be able to continue exercising. However, you will need to make some modifications. First of all, be sure to obtain your obstetrician's or health care professional's clearance to exercise.
2. Start and finish more slowly as you need to have an extended warm up and a more gradual cool down. Aim for at least five to ten minutes at the beginning and end of each session.
3. The best type of exercise during pregnancy will include a mixture of light to moderate aerobic activity and moderate resistance-based exercises. Low impact options like cross training and aerobic exercises that use the large muscle groups in a continuous manner such as walking, indoor cycling, swimming, low-impact classes and aqua fitness are great choices. With resistance training, you may need to swap free weights for machine or cable weights due to changes in your centre of gravity and hence balance. Keep intensity light, low weights, 12 to 15 repetitions of multiple muscle groups. Seek expert advice, as not all exercises are suitable.
4. Avoid activities that could increase risk of falls such as skiing, or those that may result in excessive joint stress, such as jogging, high-impact classes, boxing, tennis and any contact activities. Joints become looser during pregnancy, so injuries can occur more easily.
5. Limit the duration of cardiovascular exercise to 30 minutes maximum. Another option is to train for two periods of 15 minutes, interspersed with a break or switch to resistance training. Aim to do some activity on most days of the week.
6. Listen to your body. If something hurts or you can't hold a conversation, slow down. Your heart rate should not exceed 70 per cent of Maximum Heart Rate. To calculate your pregnancy training heart rate zone, use $220 - \text{age} \times 70$ per cent. If in doubt talk to your trainer or fitness instructor. Monitor your heart rate regularly

when training, particularly in the first trimester when the baby is growing and the organs developing.

7. Never exercise to the point of exhaustion or breathlessness. This is a sign that you and your baby are not getting the oxygen supply you both need.
8. Wear comfortable shoes that give strong ankle and arch support. Also, wear a supportive bra to protect the breast ligaments.
9. Take frequent breaks and drink plenty of fluids during exercise.
10. Avoid exercising in the hottest part of the day. It can be dangerous for your baby if your body overheats. Pregnancy is not the time to improve your fitness, but you can always improve your health.
11. Avoid lying on your back after 16 weeks as this position decreases the blood flow to the baby. An incline bench can be used as alternative to complete resistance work up until 28 weeks. After that time, train seated on a ball or bench.
12. Focus on corrective exercise techniques that strengthen the deep abdominal muscles. Avoid crunches or curls which focus on the rectus abdominus or 'six pack' especially after the first trimester. Strengthening and shortening these muscles may increase your chance of developing a split or separation in the rectus muscle. Some Pilates exercises can help to strengthen the deep stabilising muscles which support the spine and lessen back issues.
13. Eat a healthy diet with plenty of fruit, vegetables, and include a mix of essential fatty acids (EFA), high quality protein, and low GI carbohydrates at every meal. Remember, it is nutrients for two – not eating for two!
14. Take good quality pregnancy supplements with a mix of multivitamins and minerals (including folic acid) approximately three months prior to falling pregnant.

It is essential to let your trainer or fitness instructor know that you are pregnant – nine months is only a short period in your life and the most important outcome is a healthy baby. Enjoy your training!

Liz Dene, BHMS

Liz's expertise relates to exercise and pregnancy issues. With a degree in human movement, she has over 15 years experience in all areas of training and fitness and is a master trainer for Network Pilates and senior coach with the Australian Institute of Fitness. Liz merges traditional fitness practices with a holistic approach to wellbeing. For more information visit www.lizdene.com