

Exercise During Pregnancy

Pregnancy itself is an endurance exercise! In response to the demands of your growing baby, your blood volume increases and your heart rate raises. These stresses strengthen the heart muscle, just as any cardiovascular exercise does. These adaptations are protective mechanisms that make sure your baby gets necessary nutrients. Additional exercise, in the form of walking, yoga, or swimming (just a few examples) enhances your body's ability to adapt to these cardiovascular changes. Studies show that women who are physically active have much greater blood volumes and have better heart function. Exercise also makes for better blood pressure levels, hemoglobin counts, and placental function. All of these benefits combine to help oxygen and nutrients get to your baby more efficiently. Exercise during pregnancy has also been shown to help women help women during the marathon work of labor as well.

Safety Guidelines

- Avoid exercising while lying down, especially in late pregnancy. Limit flat on the back exercise time to 2-3 minutes, and do these exercises *before* aerobic or cardiovascular training exercises.
- Limit aerobic exercise while standing to 20-30 minutes at a time if you're not very physically fit, or 30-45 minutes if you're already very physically fit.
- Avoid sudden changes of position or level.
- Include a thorough cooldown to prevent pooling of blood in the extremities.
- Rest daily in the side-lying position to maximize blood flow during the second and third trimesters.

(Reference: Varney's Midwifery, 4th Edition, Page 194)

Recommended Exercises

- **Walking** – Walking is free, requires no special equipment (except for some appropriate shoes), can be done almost everywhere, is safe for almost everyone, and is a great exercise.
- **Yoga** – Most prenatal yoga programs are great for just about every pregnant woman. If you're new to exercising, you will want to listen to your body's signals if the exercises seem too intense. Due to increased levels of the hormone relaxin, your body is more prone to injury during pregnancy.
- **Exercise Ball** – There are several pregnancy exercise videos that make use of the exercise ball.
- **Pilates** – Pilates is very gentle exercise and works to strengthen the abdominal core, pelvic floor, and spine, which are especially important during pregnancy.
- **Swimming** – The weightlessness you feel while swimming relieves back pain and lessens swelling. Swimming is a great cardiovascular exercise, and it can help your baby get into the right position for birth as well. Swimming is safe and enjoyable during all three trimesters.
- **Prenatal Aerobics** – If you want to take a prenatal aerobics class, you may certainly do so, but you need to proceed with caution if you aren't normally active. Take it slowly, watch your heart rate, and stop if you need to.

Special Pregnancy & Postpartum Exercises

- **Hiss/Compress** – In a seated position, exhale while making a hissing sound and contracting your abdominal muscles, pulling your abdomen towards your spine. Relax the abdomen and inhale through the nose. Do 2-3 sets of 5 repetitions. This exercise strengthens the muscles used during the pushing stage of labor, and can also be used postpartum to help flatten the lower abdomen and protect the lumbar spine.
- **Pelvic Rocks** – Pelvic rocks are great for relieving back pain and for encouraging your baby to get into the optimal position for birth. Pelvic rocks also gently strengthen the abdominal and back muscles as well.
- **Kegels** – Another free exercise program! Kegels should be part of every woman's daily activities throughout her entire life.

KEGEL EXERCISES

(Reference: <http://www.askdrsears.com/html/1/T012200.asp>)

Kegel exercises strengthen all the muscles supporting your uro-genital tract. Nature intends the pelvic floor muscles to relax somewhat during pregnancy to prepare for delivery of the baby. But if your pelvic floor is already weak you may find you have trouble with leaking of urine as your uterus grows and strains the muscles that support it and your bladder. Incontinence can continue after pregnancy, since these muscles are stretched to their utmost when you push out the baby.

Doing Kegel exercises can not only prevent or treat pregnancy incontinence, they can make birth itself easier, because once you have practiced exercising your pelvic floor muscles; you'll know how to release them. Releasing not only makes labor more comfortable, it also helps you avoid tearing these tissues during the birth when baby's head moves through the vagina. As a side benefit, many women who do Kegel exercises report enhanced sensitivity during intercourse, and many of their partners claim greater pleasure as well.

To locate your pelvic floor muscles, try to stop your urine flow midstream. If you can do it easily and quickly, your pelvic floor is in pretty good shape. If you can't, you'll find a few weeks of kegels will work wonders. Another way to locate these muscles is to try to clench them around two fingers inserted into the vagina, or around your partner's penis during intercourse.

6 KEGEL VARIATIONS TO PRACTICE

1. Stop and start. Attempt to stop and start your urine flow four or five times as you urinate. This beginner exercise is a bit tricky because you need to use only the pelvic floor muscles, without assistance from your thigh and lower abdominal muscles. Think of it as "winking" your vagina.
2. Reps. Contract and release your pelvic floor muscles. Start with ten repetitions four times a day and work up to fifty reps four times a day. This exercise is great to squeeze in (no pun intended) during TV commercials or when someone on the phone puts you on hold.
3. Holding. Contract your pelvic floor muscles for a count of five, then release. Repeat ten times. Gradually increase the length of time you keep the muscles tensed.
4. The elevator. This exercise takes some concentration, but the results are fantastic. Your vagina is a muscular tube, with the sections arranged like rings one on top of another. Imagine each section as a different "floor" of a building, and that you are moving an elevator up and down by tensing each section, getting progressively higher. Start by slowly bringing the elevator up to the second floor and holding for a second, then move up to the third, and so on, until you get to the fifth floor. Hold. Now bring the elevator down, floor-by-floor, "resting" at each floor, to the first floor (the starting point). Then make a trip to the basement, where your pelvic floor is completely relaxed.
5. The wave. Some of the pelvic floor muscles are arranged in a sort of extended figure-eight pattern (like an eight with three loops instead of two). One of the loops is around your urethra, one around your vagina, and one around your anus. A good Kegel exercise is to contract these muscles from front to back, and release from back to front.
6. Positioning. Once you become proficient at Kegel exercises, try them in a variety of positions -- lying down, sitting up, squatting, tailor sitting, on all fours.