

need to know: exercise in pregnancy

FROM THE BENEFITS OF YOGA TO THE WISDOM OF
A SKIING TRIP: 36 QUESTIONS, 36 ANSWERS

1 ARE THERE ANY SPECIAL BENEFITS OF EXERCISE IN PREGNANCY? Exercise promotes strength, stamina, flexibility and muscle tone, which will support your pregnancy and prepare you for the physical challenge of labour (often likened to running a marathon). It will help to counteract discomforts such as fatigue, constipation, backache and oedema (swelling) and make it easier to get back into shape after your baby is born.

2 WILL REGULAR EXERCISE MAKE GIVING BIRTH EASIER? Regular exercise strengthens the body, builds stamina and gives you better control of your breathing, all of which will help you through labour. Pregnancy yoga will specifically target the birthing parts of the body.

3 CAN EXERCISE SHORTEN LABOUR? The jury is out on this one. Most researchers have not found exercise during pregnancy to have any effect on the course of labour and delivery; but some studies have shown that women who exercise have shorter active or second stages of labour.

4 WHEN IS THE BEST TIME TO BEGIN? Many women prefer to start exercising after the nausea, vomiting and fatigue of the first trimester have subsided. It is safe to exercise earlier, but proceed cautiously and avoid overheating. Although no studies have shown a danger to humans, some animal studies suggest that overheating during the first trimester (when your baby is developing all its important organs) can cause birth defects.

5 WHAT SORT OF EXERCISE PLAN SHOULD I GO FOR? It depends on your current fitness. If you don't usually

exercise, pick an easy, low-impact sport such as walking or swimming, and proceed slowly. "Each pregnancy is different, so the most important thing is to listen to your body," says fitness expert Joanna Hall, author of *The Exercise Bible*. If you're active and practise a safe sport, you can probably continue, as long as you modify it to suit your pregnancy.

6 WHAT ARE THE BEST SPORTS FOR PREGNANT WOMEN? Swimming is ideal, as it takes the pressure off your spine and encourages optimal fetal positioning – as does walking. For gentle, all-round exercise, try pregnancy yoga or Pilates, both of which exercise the body through the various stages of pregnancy and help to prepare you physically and psychologically for the birth.

7 HOW LONG SHOULD I EXERCISE FOR? Begin with 15 minutes three times a week, and progress according to what your body will happily tolerate. Intense bursts of cardiovascular exercise should be limited to periods of 15–20 minutes to avoid overheating. Gentler exercise can continue for 30–60 minutes, depending on how fit you are.

8 HOW ENERGETIC CAN MY EXERCISE REGIME GET? Not so vigorous that you can't hold a conversation while exercising. It is also important to keep cool and hydrated, and limit intense cardiovascular exercise to between 15 and 20 minutes.

9 WHICH SPORTS SHOULD I AVOID? Contact sports (such as martial arts) are best avoided, as are any with a risk of falling from heights, such as horse-riding or mountaineering. Water sports that are off-limit include waterskiing and diving. Avoid ▶

CLASS OF 1956: PRE-NATAL
EXERCISE AS IT USED TO BE, AS
SHOWN IN GRANTLY DICK READ'S
ANTENATAL ILLUSTRATED

your first trimester, and ski two levels below your ability. Most doctors and midwives will advise you to stay off the slopes entirely.

23 WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF AQUA-AEROBICS? Water exercise is easy, safe, and beneficial at all levels from beginner to advanced. You needn't even be a swimmer to exercise in the shallow end. Most aquatic classes are held in an indoor pool, as the depth and temperature are easily controlled. As you progress, you may move from knee-depth to deeper water.

24 CAN I USE A FITNESS BALL? Yes – it's a fun way to strengthen your torso without straining the pelvis and knees, which are vulnerable in pregnancy. Just by sitting on a fitness ball, you use all the muscles that support your growing uterus. Buy a ball that fits your height, and follow the instructions on how to inflate and store it properly.

25 CAN I KEEP GOING TO MY REGULAR YOGA CLASS? As long as you tell your teacher, and s/he is comfortable teaching you while you are pregnant. However, there are many postures you can no longer do safely, so it is preferable to find a specifically designed pregnancy yoga class.

26 IS IT TRUE THAT I SHOULD AVOID BREAST-STROKE? No. Breast-stroke, front crawl and back-stroke are all safe, healthy swimming strokes for pregnancy. The one to avoid is butterfly, which can severely arch your back and over-stretch your abdominal muscles.

27 ARE HEAVIER BREASTS MORE SUSCEPTIBLE TO DAMAGE IN EXERCISE? Your breasts will feel tender and sensitive, especially during the first and last trimesters as they grow heavier and fuller, so the bouncing and friction that activity causes may be quite uncomfortable, and can cause backache and poor posture. Avoid jogging, running and other high-impact exercise. A well-fitting maternity or nursing bra should help you feel more comfortable.

28 HOW DO I CHOOSE A SPORTS BRA FOR PREGNANCY? Look for a firmly supportive, well-fitting sports bra, or even wear two sports bras for extra support. Avoid demi-bras, underwires, and lace and synthetic fabrics, which may irritate. As your breasts grow, try a bra with moulded cups that won't rub your nipples. If your nipples are very sensitive, protect them with cloth nursing pads or apply Vaseline.

29 CAN EXERCISE HELP VARICOSE VEINS AND SWOLLEN ANKLES? It can help to relieve ankle swelling by working your leg muscles and improving circulation, although some women find that swelling increases after prolonged activity. Support stockings, which cover the shins and thighs, can also alleviate the discomfort of varicose veins and ankle swelling, by helping the blood (which tends to pool in dilated veins during pregnancy) to circulate.

30 HOW ABOUT RELIEVING PELVIC PAIN? Pelvic pain is a common complaint during pregnancy, caused by a laxity in the ligaments induced by the pregnancy-related hormones relaxin and progesterone. Water aerobics, in particular, has been shown to alleviate pelvic and low-back pain in pregnancy.

31 HOW CAN I TELL IF I'M OVER-DOING IT? Stop exercising immediately if you experience dizziness, shortness of breath, faintness, vaginal bleeding, blurred vision, difficulty walking, contractions or an unusual absence of fetal movement. If any of these symptoms persist after you've cooled down, call your midwife or doctor immediately.

32 WON'T EXERCISE DIVERT BLOOD FLOW AND GLUCOSE FROM THE FETUS? Although blood flow is diverted from the fetus during exercise, studies have shown that this does not have any prolonged, notable or harmful effect on the growing baby. Another concern has been that increased maternal glucose levels could limit nutrient availability to the fetus. While some studies have demonstrated a fall in maternal glucose levels during exercise, few investigators have noted differences in fetal growth when comparing exercising and non-exercising pregnant women.

33 HAVE STUDIES LINKED EXERCISE TO PREMATURE DELIVERY? No. Concerns that exercise may lead to uterine contractions and premature labour are based on the theory that decreased

blood flow to the uterus during exercise may lead to contractions, or that the hormonal response to exercise may induce contractions and premature birth. While some women do note contractions during exercise, studies have not found increased rates of pre-term delivery in pregnant women who exercise.

34 HAVE ANY STUDIES LINKED EXERCISE TO MISCARRIAGE? It's a great misconception that exercise can somehow lead to miscarriage. The most common cause of miscarriage is fetal death due to abnormalities. Other causes include infection, hormone factors, immune problems and disease in the mother – but exercise is definitely not a cause.

35 HOW DO I STRENGTHEN MY PELVIC FLOOR? The pelvic floor is formed of layers of muscles that support the uterus, bowel and bladder. Pregnancy and childbirth put pressure on these muscles, which can lead to stress incontinence (leakage when you sneeze or cough). It is strongly advised that you exercise these muscles to maintain their strength. To do so, inhale as you pull up the muscles, hold for five seconds, then exhale and release them. Repeat ten times, five sets daily.

36 WHEN CAN I RESTART EXERCISE AFTER THE BIRTH? Most midwives recommend at least four to six weeks of rest before you restart any exercise programme, or six to eight weeks if you've had a Caesarean section.

RESOURCES

FURTHER READING

- The Exercise Bible* by Joanna Hall (Kyle Cathie, £14.99)
The Active Woman's Guide To Pregnancy by Anouka van Groenou (Ten Speed Press, £13.99)
The Body Control Pilates Pregnancy Book by Lynne Robinson (Macmillan, £12.99)
Yoga for Pregnancy, Birth and Beyond by Françoise Barbira Freedman (Dorling Kindersley, £9.99)

WEB RESOURCES

- AMERICAN ACADEMY OF FAMILY PHYSICIANS www.aafp.org
 BIRTHLIGHT www.birthlight.com
 CHILD BIRTH www.childbirth.org
 THE PHYSICIAN AND SPORTSMEDICINE ONLINE www.physsportsmed.com

WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY

Dr Michael Dooley, gynaecologist to the British Olympic Medical Institute
 "In most cases, women benefit from an exercise programme throughout pregnancy – it reduces the likelihood of many common pregnancy complaints. However, if the mother has a medical condition, she must balance the risks and benefits, in consultation with her obstetrician or midwife. It is important to develop a programme for your needs."

Joanna Hall, fitness expert and author of The Exercise Bible
 "Replace impact activities and twisting, with brisk walking. As you walk, work your abdominals: tuck your ribcage down and extend tall through the top of the head. Take long strides and extend through the heel for buttock-lifting. Work your pelvic floor with varied-paced contractions: contract for eight strides then release, repeating five to ten times; then contract and release every two strides, repeating as before. Most of all, listen to your body and respect it."

Lynne Robinson, author and director of the Body Control Pilates Association
 "Work on your stabilising muscles, as your ligaments get lax due to hormonal changes. Pilates' fundamental actions, the 'zip and hollow', work your pelvic floor and transversus muscle, which form a natural corset to support the uterus and keep your pelvis and spine stable. The transversus is also the muscle you use to push during labour."

Françoise Barbira Freedman, author of Yoga For Pregnancy, Birth And Beyond
 "Always start a yoga session with a short rest, to release stress and connect with yourself and your growing baby. Extend your exhalation as you breathe: it's the most effective, safe and easy way to involve your deep abdominal and lower back muscles, for optimal toning and elasticity. It will also increase your breathing capacity, help prevent hyperventilation and restore stamina during labour."

scuba diving, too, as it is not known how the increase in pressure and nitrogen sickness may affect your pregnancy or baby.

10 SHOULD I TELL MY MIDWIFE ABOUT MY EXERCISE PROGRAMME? Definitely: you should always check with your midwife and doctor before starting or continuing any exercise programme. Every woman and every pregnancy is different, so it is important that your midwife and doctor know what you are doing.

11 WHAT IF I'VE NEVER EXERCISED BEFORE? Tell your doctor or midwife you are embarking on an exercise programme, opt for low-impact activities such as walking and swimming, and keep sessions short (15–20 minutes). "If you are not already fit, getting fit once you are pregnant is not a good idea as your body will already be going through a considerable amount of adaptation," says Joanna Hall. "Instead, try to achieve 30 minutes of physical activity every

day, to help you get used to your changing body."

12 ARE THERE ANY CONDITIONS THAT MIGHT PRECLUDE ME FROM EXERCISING? Yes. Tell your midwife or doctor of any pre-pregnancy medical conditions. If you have any of the following, you will need particular advice: heart problems; asthma or lung problems; high blood pressure; extreme weight problems; muscle or joint problems; a history of premature labour or several miscarriages; multiple pregnancy; a history of incompetent cervix; persistent bleeding; placental problems.

13 CAN I KEEP CYCLING? Cycling is a good exercise for the first two trimesters. As you get bigger, you'll have to get used to changes in the distribution of your weight, and may need to adjust your saddle and handlebars. Most doctors recommend stopping cycling after the second trimester because of the potential for falls.

14 WHY CAN'T I LIE ON MY BACK IN MY YOGA CLASS? After 30 weeks it is advised that women do not lie on their backs for longer than a few minutes. This is because it can put pressure on the inferior vena cava (the vein that returns blood from the legs to the heart) and cause dizziness, shortness of breath and nausea.

15 CAN I GO ICE-SKATING? Unfortunately not. Sports that pose a risk to being thrown off-balance are strictly off-limits, for your baby's sake.

16 I LOVE HIKING. CAN I STILL DO IT IN MY THIRD TRIMESTER? Hiking itself is low-risk, but avoid scrambling or climbing: as your belly grows, your ability to find safe footholds decreases, so muddy, narrow or rocky paths get more hazardous. Reduce distances, pick easier routes, avoid the heat and observe good posture.

17 HOW ABOUT A CAMPING TRIP? If you take a few simple precautions, camping during the first two trimesters is safe and fun (although sleeping will become less comfortable as you expand). But do assess the risks of each site and plan carefully. Take into account the weather and altitude, don't carry heavy gear, and choose a pitch close to toilet facilities.

18 WHAT'S A SENSIBLE WALKING DISTANCE FOR MID-PREGNANCY? Walking is a great way to exercise, right up until you give birth. If you are already a keen walker, keep up your regular programme. If you're a beginner, start with 15–20 minutes three days a week and build up to 30–60 minutes six days a week.

19 HOW MUCH WEIGHT CAN I LIFT? Most health professionals recommend that pregnant women avoid weight-training after the first trimester – lifting reduces blood flow to the kidneys and uterus. Avoid heavy loads and use a standard conditioning approach. Correct posture, breathing and lifting technique are vital: don't strain or hold your breath. Using exercise machines rather than free weights is smarter for later pregnancy, when normal balance is disrupted.

20 CAN I SNORKEL IN MY MIDDLE TRIMESTER? Yes. Snorkelling is low-risk all through pregnancy, and the water will support your extra weight. But breathing through the snorkel may bother you, especially in later pregnancy, as the growing baby will put pressure on your diaphragm, making it harder to breathe. It's advisable to wear a life-jacket and fins, as your bump may make you a bit off-balance.

21 WHY IS PILATES SO GOOD IN PREGNANCY? Pilates' slow, controlled movements are very safe as they are non-impact and won't stress your joints. Pilates places great emphasis on good posture and alignment, so is a great antidote to postural problems. It also teaches you to relax – invaluable during labour and beyond.

22 CAN I GO SKIING THIS WINTER (I'LL BE FOUR MONTHS PREGNANT)? No. Downhill skiing is too risky – unless you're a veteran skier in

IT'S BEST TO FIND A CLASS SPECIFICALLY DESIGNED FOR PREGNANCY



SNORKELLING IS LOW-RISK, AND THE WATER WILL SUPPORT YOUR EXTRA WEIGHT