

Exercising whilst pregnant – just what is safe to do?

These days, you no longer need to wrap yourself in cotton wool when you are pregnant (thank goodness!). Instead, careful and controlled exercise whilst pregnant is not only safe but also extremely beneficial for you and your baby. In fact, here are just a few of the reasons you should give it a go:

Benefits for you:

- Control of excessive weight gain
- Improved posture and less back pain
- Reduced chance of varicose veins, constipation, cramps
- Better sleep patterns
- Better prepared for labour
- Quicker post-natal recovery

Benefits for the baby:

- Improved blood flow and nutrients to the baby
- Increased oxygen delivery to the baby
- Baby can be fitter and healthier too

Getting started

It's absolutely essential that you talk to your doctor before starting or continuing any exercise programme when pregnant. This isn't anything to be scared of – it's just important to check that you have a 'low-risk' pregnancy and so no concerns or complications. Once you've got the all-clear then you're good to go. However, the sort of exercise you should do totally depends on your level of fitness before you got pregnant and what sorts of things you like doing.

Little to no exercise before pregnancy

If you didn't exercise much before you were pregnant, there is no point signing up for a 5k run, you need to start off slowly. However going to a gym by yourself for the first time can be a daunting experience – “which machine to use first?”, “am I doing it right?”, “is it ok for the baby?”, etc. So instead don't go it alone, try one or more of the following:

- Sign up for a pre-natal exercise class, such as pilates or yoga. They're a great way to stay in shape in a safe and knowledgeable environment – plus they're also a great place to make new friends.
- Your gym should have instructors qualified in exercise and pregnancy. Get one of them to show you a beginner's programme. It's a great way to learn the ropes and feel more confident at the same time.
- However, if you feel you want a more specific pregnancy workout or even would feel better exercising in your own home or your local park, then getting a suitably qualified personal trainer can be a good idea. And before you worry, this doesn't have to break the bank. Many personal trainers will let you sign up for a short number of sessions and write you personalised pre-natal exercise programmes for you to do yourself throughout your pregnancy – letting you manage your weight gain AND your bank account at the same time!

Exercised before pregnancy

If you are a regular exerciser then you should focus on maintaining your current fitness levels rather than trying to improve them. And competitions are a definite no, no. So what is ok to do?

- Continuing with your exercise classes is fine as long as they aren't high intensity/impact. Just make sure you tell the instructor beforehand so they can keep an eye on you or even tell you to avoid certain parts of the class.
- If you liked going to the gym before you were pregnant and want to carry on, it's a good idea to ask one of the instructors to help you modify your exercise plan accordingly. Or if you want a more tailored

programme that changes at each stage of your pregnancy whilst also giving you the flexibility to exercise at home or in the park, getting a personal trainer can also be a good idea.

- And for all you runners out there – the answer to the \$64,000 question is yes, you can carry on whilst pregnant. However, you must reduce the intensity levels and be aware that at some point (usually by the end of the second trimester) you will be carrying too much weight to run comfortably (and while Paula Radcliffe ran a 10k when 7 months, she's the exception rather than the rule!).

10 things to remember

1. Before exercising, eat a light, starchy carb meal 1 – 2 hours beforehand.
2. Drink plenty of water before, during and after exercising and don't exercise in hot or humid conditions.
3. When exercising, warm up gradually with 5-10 mins of light cardio (e.g. easy walking) and cool down with 3-5 mins of the same afterwards.
4. Mix up bite-sized chunks (5-15 mins) of moderate activity with short periods of light activity to recover (e.g. brisk walk, easy walk, brisk walk).
5. Don't exceed a moderate level of intensity. This can be described as somewhat hard but maintainable, feeling a little puffed/sweaty and able to hold a conversation.
6. If you have used weights before, go lighter within a rep range of 12 to 15. If not, don't start on your own, ask for instruction.
7. From your second trimester onwards, when you are starting to show, avoid doing any exercises where you lie on your back, or any exercises where you dynamically work your core or abdominal muscles (e.g. sit-ups, ab curls, oblique twists or side bends).
8. Avoid exercises or sports that involve contact, high impact, uneven surfaces, lots of balance and quick changes of direction. So say goodbye to racquet sports, horse riding, skiing, martial arts to name a few.
9. Listen to your body. If something doesn't feel right – STOP! Then review what you're doing and ask advice before the next time you exercise.
10. Try to exercise 3-5 times a week (but remember – once is better than nothing!).

To find a personal trainer and to check out the credentials of both gym instructors and personal trainers, go to the website of the Register of Exercise Professionals at: www.exerciseregister.org.

For more information on exercising whilst pregnant, check out my website: www.ThriveFitness.co.uk or if you have a specific question about exercising whilst pregnant, feel free to email me at: michel@thrivefitness.co.uk.

Happy (and safe) exercising!

Michel

Michel Glendinning is accredited personal trainer and qualified in pre and post-natal exercise. She also owns and runs the East London-based personal training company Thrive Fitness.

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