

Exercise – Before, during and after pregnancy

Exercise during pregnancy has been a controversial topic. Doctors advise some women to not exercise due to medical conditions and complications. For other women, it is the free advice or family and friends that makes them stop working out as soon as they know they are pregnant. What does research and science tell us about prenatal and postnatal workout?

This article is meant to address this concern and answer some frequently asked questions.

1. Who can exercise?
2. What are the benefits of exercise on maternal health?
3. What is the effect on the fetus?
4. When is exercise contraindicated?
5. What exercises and modifications should be done to have a healthy pregnancy?
6. What exercises should be avoided during pregnancy?
7. A sample workout and yoga plan for pregnancy
8. When to resume exercise post pregnancy to safely lose the baby weight?
9. A sample workout plan for postpartum moms

Who can exercise before pregnancy?

Everyone planning for a baby should exercise. Exercise improves the fertility of both partners. It regulates the metabolism, reduces the stress levels, improves hormonal balance and increases blood circulation to the reproductive organs. This ensures better nourishment which improves the quality of the egg and the sperm which increases the probability of conceiving.

Exercise should be done for 30 minutes at least 5 times a day at 60% of the maximum exertion level (perceived at 12-14 in the BORG RPE Scale) while planning for a baby. A minimum of 6 months of regular workout is needed to see the difference in all health parameters.

What are the benefits of exercises on maternal health?

ACOG (The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists), **ACSM** (The American College of Sports Medicine), **RCOG** (The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists) guidelines confirm exercise during pregnancy is safe. Some of the benefits of regular and moderate exercise during pregnancy are :

- a. Reduced fat deposition and retention
- b. Shorter and less complicated labours
Women who workout during pregnancy have higher incidence of uncomplicated, spontaneous delivery, shorter labor and lower C-section rate.
- c. Reduced risk of getting gestational diabetes
- d. Rapid recovery postpartum
- e. Greater energy levels to deal with daily chores

- f. Greater tolerance to physiological stresses like fatigue, nausea, constipation, excessive weight gain, varicose veins and psychological stresses like anxiety and depression better.
- g. Lower levels of physical discomfort and complaints
Exercises for abdominal and back muscles provide stability and support for the spine helps prevent low back pain. Staying stretched and flexible reduces back discomfort, muscular tension and leg cramping.

What is the effect on fetal health?

- Improves the placental function: Higher surface area and blood vessel in placenta, meaning better nourishment for the fetus
- Reduces the risk of having larger babies and c section
- Studies show that babies born to women who exercised were less fat at birth and maintained the same later in life.
- Babies had higher APGAR scores at birth and scored higher on general intelligence and oral language skill tests

When is exercise contraindicated?

Before starting or continuing workout in your pregnancy, share your workout pattern with your Doctor and check whether it is safe for you to do it.

Contraindications and warning signs to stop workout are :

- ✚ Vaginal bleeding
- ✚ Incompetent cervix/short cervical length – if diagnosed
- ✚ Contractions that are regular and painful
- ✚ Amniotic fluid leakage
- ✚ Headache
- ✚ Chest pain
- ✚ Muscle weakness that affects balance
- ✚ Calf pain or swelling
- ✚ Acute illness
- ✚ Fatigue
- ✚ Exhaustion
- ✚ Excessive stress

What exercises should you avoid during pregnancy?

- Contact sport like kickboxing, soccer, basketball.
- Sport that have a higher chance of falls like horse riding, skiing, gymnastics, Scuba diving or sky diving.
- Exercises that compromise balance or need more balance to hold postures.
- After the second trimester, any Yoga asanas that involve Inversions (like Sirsasana, sarvangasana, halasana where heart is higher than head) should be avoided.

- After the trimester, any workouts that requires you to be on your back or on your tummy.

What are the safe exercise rules for pregnancy?

- ✓ Workout at half the strength of what you used to workout before pregnancy.
- ✓ Never exercise till exhaustion. If you feel you are losing your breath or dizzy, stop the workout right away.
- ✓ Sip water often while working out.
- ✓ Keep your feet more than hip width apart to accommodate your tummy and to open your hips and inner thighs more.
- ✓ If you have never exercised before pregnancy , workout at a pace where you can still talk without losing your breath. Heart rate, body temperature etc are not true indicators of exertion levels during pregnancy.

A sample workout plan.

2 sets of 8- 10 reps of each workout.

- Squats
- Lunges
- Push up – Drop knee if needed
- Lat pull down
- Hammer curls
- Calf raises

A sample yoga plan

- 3 rounds of suryanamaskar – modified for pregnancy
- Triangle pose
- Goddess pose
- Warrior pose
- Uttanasana – standing forward folding pose
- Cat cow pose
- Downward dog pose
- Sitting side bend
- Baddhakonasana – cobbler pose
- Child's pose
- Savasana – on your side (with pillow between legs)after first trimester

When can one start working out postpartum?

Light physical activity can be safely started 45 days postpartum and regular workout can be started 90 days from the time baby is born even if you had a C- section.

While exercising post pregnancy, some women might feel a bit of pain or muscle pull in the mid section especially if they have had a C section or have lost a lot of core strength. It is normal to feel that way. The discomfort and pain will fade when you get regular with workout.

Your Breastmilk quality and quantity will not be affected due to workout.

Exercise for 30 minutes every other day to start with.

Have a protein shake within 10 minutes of finishing workout.

A sample postpartum workout plan

3 sets of 8 reps of each variation

- Wide legged Squats
- Walking Lunges - 8 on each leg
- Deadlifts
- Knee push up /wall push at an incline
- Hammer curls
- Planks
- Leg raises
- Calf raises

Slowly increase the reps and weights every 4-5 weeks.

Expect a lot of muscle soreness when you start exercising postpartum since the body hasn't been trained for a few months.

Protein shake soon after the workout, hydration through the day, rest and balanced food on your plate will help you recover faster.

Pregnancy and motherhood doesn't have to leave you with a weak or saggy body , but should make you stronger, mentally and physically.

Happy Motherhood !!!