

Physical Activity Guidelines

- If you are not used to being physically active, start gently and gradually build up.
- Regular physical activity (at least three times a week) is better than the occasional blast.
- Don't start a new sport during pregnancy. Continue a sport you enjoy if this is considered safe for you.
- Always warm up for 5 to 10 minutes before starting, to loosen your muscles and help prevent injury. After your activities cool down with gentle stretches, this helps your heart return to its normal resting rate.
- Eat enough to provide energy to yourself and your growing baby.
- Drink plenty of water before, during and after your exercise session. An increase in body temperature can harm the foetus - particularly in the first three months.
- Wear a supportive bra, supportive shoes and loose clothing in layers to peel off as you warm up.
- Avoid jarring, jumping and other high impact activity.
- Don't exercise if you're tired and don't exercise to the point of exhaustion.
- Set aside time for a daily rest, when you feel tired, particularly during the later stages.
- Don't overexert yourself in very hot weather.

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A guide to Pregnancy and Exercise



Health New Zealand
Te Whatu Ora

So you've just found you're pregnant and you're not sure how this huge change in your life is going to affect your fitness levels.

Maybe you're already very fit and want to maintain that. Maybe you're not as fit as you'd like and want to use this time to develop a more active and healthy lifestyle.

In either case, an exercise programme has something to offer you.

Exercise in pregnancy offers a variety of benefits:

- It can maintain and even improve cardiovascular fitness in preparation for labour.
- It can improve muscular strength in preparation for carrying the baby and baby's paraphernalia.
- It can improve your posture which helps avoid the back ache frequently associated with pregnancy.
- It may reduce the length of your labour, the need for intervention and for pain relief.
- Can ease common problems such as leg cramps, high blood pressure and constipation.
- It improves your circulation thus helping prevent varicose veins.
- It can help you avoid excessive weight gain.
- It also improves your stamina – reducing fatigue during pregnancy.

Like any fitness programme, there are risks as well as benefits. These can include reduced blood supply to the baby, low blood sugar, overheating of the baby, strains and sprains, premature labour and dizziness or fainting. A properly managed and realistic exercise programme can help ensure the benefits far outweigh the risks.

Being fit will help you feel well and relaxed during pregnancy and birth and speed your postnatal recovery.

Before You Begin An Exercise Programme

First, discuss your proposed exercise programme with your midwife to make sure there are no medical objections.

Some conditions may preclude you from exercise. These include a history of miscarriages, placenta praevia, heart disease, multiple pregnancies, a weak cervix, severe toxemia, obesity, anaemia, and diabetes or thyroid disease

If you're not fit, or have only participated in moderate activity, then the best exercise is regular, low impact and aerobic.

Aim for three 30 minute sessions a week.

Suitable activities include:

- Jogging
- Walking
- Swimming
- Cycling
- Low impact aerobic

Activities to avoid include:

- Water skiing
- Contact sports
- Anaerobic exercise (such as sprinting or squash)
- Gymnastics
- Sports such as scuba diving, mountain climbing or activities which involve changes in pressure or high altitudes which may effect the oxygen supply to the baby

As your pregnancy progresses, your weight distribution will change and your joints will loosen. These changes may mean you need to switch activities, perhaps from jogging to swimming. You'll also find that your skill level changes as the baby grows – you won't be able to change direction as easily for instance. Be flexible and be realistic.

Be Exercise Wise

Don't feel you need to maintain the same level of skill and intensity throughout your pregnancy. Although this isn't a time to lose weight or train for a major event, you'll be surprised how quickly full fitness will return after birth.

If you're not already exercising, start slowly and build up to 30 minutes three times a week.

Walking and swimming are particularly suitable activities for first time exercisers.

If you're already training, you should be able to continue at the same perceived level of effort for as long as you feel comfortable, although the actual level of work should decrease as your pregnancy progresses.

In either case, the talk test will show whether you're exercising at a safe level. If you can't talk (to yourself or a friend) your heart and respiratory rate are approaching a level that may harm the baby.

If you experience any of the following, stop your activity and see your doctor or midwife urgently:

- Vaginal bleeding or fluid discharge
- Pain
- Dizziness or fainting
- Persistent contractions or a reduction in your baby's movement.

After Giving Birth

After the birth, you can start pelvic floor exercises as soon as you're able. If you've maintained good fitness throughout the last nine months you should be able to return to aerobic exercise fairly quickly.

Some women do so within a matter of days of an uncomplicated delivery but most will be able to within two weeks. If your child was born by caesarean section, you may have to wait for three to four weeks.

If breastfeeding, ensure you have a healthy food intake to meet the demands of breastfeeding and your exercise regime. Exercise should not affect your volume of milk production, providing you drink large amounts of fluid.