



## Fitness advice for the mom-to-be

BY JUDY KERPELMAN, M.D.

**Pregnancy doesn't have to put an end to your fitness routine. In fact, being fit will allow you as much control over pregnancy and birth as possible.**

**O**ne of the most common questions that I get asked by women who are pregnant or considering pregnancy is whether or not they can exercise. There are many benefits to remaining active while pregnant whether you are a casual walker, a yoga devotee, or an elite competitive athlete. Studies have shown that women who exercise during pregnancy have shorter labors, gain less fat, require less medical intervention during delivery, and recover more quickly than sedentary women.

## **BENEFITS OF EXERCISE**

The American Academy of Sports Medicine and the Centers for Disease Control recommend moderately intense aerobic activity for 30 to 40 minutes a day on most days. Resistance training is recommended as an adjunct two to three times per week. Despite the amount of information available about the benefits of exercise, only 20 percent of Americans engage in regular exercise.

For most pregnant women, exercise has numerous physical and psychological benefits. It can improve aerobic capacity, which contributes to shorter labors and less intervention during delivery. Energy levels increase. There are many musculoskeletal benefits, including increased strength and endurance, improved balance, and decreased low back pain. Psychological benefits include less tension and fatigue, improved energy and mood, and improved self image. The children of exercisers may perform better on tests of intelligence and oral language skills, although this may not be directly related to the exercise.

## **PHYSIOLOGIC CHANGES IN PREGNANCY**

There are many physiologic changes in the cardiovascular, respiratory, gastrointestinal, and musculoskeletal systems that occur during pregnancy. Cardiovascular changes can lead to shortness of breath, fatigue, dizziness, and nausea. Changes in posture and the center of gravity can lead to loss of balance. Hormones cause ligament and joint laxity that make you more prone to muscle pulls and injuries. All of these changes can affect the way your body responds to different activities.

## **GOALS**

Don't look for large fitness gains when pregnant. Instead, look to maintain current fitness levels. You will achieve increased muscle control and body awareness that can decrease the anxiety, fear and pain of labor and delivery. Be sure to get medical clearance early in pregnancy, and update it each trimester.

## **PERSONALIZED APPROACH**

Previously inactive women can begin mild to moderate exercise after the 13th week. Active women can continue their accustomed activity level in the first trimester. Activity can be increased during the second trimester and scaled back in the last few months. Use perceived exertion to monitor your activity; it is not necessary to monitor your pulse. If you can talk while working out and you aren't sweating profusely, you are probably not overdoing it.

## **SMART EXERCISE CHOICES**

- Walking
- Biking
- Swimming

- Weight training with moderate weights
- Modified yoga and Pilates

## **ACTIVITIES TO AVOID**

- *Contact sports* - ice hockey, soccer, basketball can result in trauma to the uterus or placenta
- *Sports with a risk of falls* - downhill skiing, waterskiing, horseback riding increases the risk of ligament strain, trauma to the uterus and placenta
- *Sports with risk for pressure changes* - Scuba diving and mountain climbing above 6000 feet
- *Exercise flat on the back*

## **EXERCISING GUIDELINES**

- Low to moderate intensity at 50-70 percent maximum heart rate or effort
- Avoid laying flat on back after 4 months
- Avoid activities requiring valsava (bearing down)
- Don't get overheated
- Drink before and after to avoid dehydration
- Avoid competitive team sports to avoid injury
- Avoid ballistic movements (bouncy or jerky)
- Keep continuous exercise under 1 hour 15 minutes for toned athletes
- Decrease intensity as pregnancy advances
- Warm up 8-12 minutes and cool down after
- Wear light weight non-restrictive clothing
- Avoid steam rooms, saunas, and hot tubs over 100 degrees Fahrenheit

## **INDICATIONS TO STOP**

- Pain of any kind
- Contractions less than 20 minutes apart
- Bleeding or leaking fluid
- Dizziness or faintness
- Shortness of breath, palpitations, heart racing
- Nausea or vomiting
- Swelling
- Baby less active

## **THINK ABOUT NUTRITION**

Pregnant women require 300 extra calories per day. Teenagers who are pregnant require as much as 600 extra calories per day. If you exercise while you are pregnant, make sure that you replace the calories that you burn off. Eat a well rounded nutritious diet.

## **SUMMARY**

Exercise can help you feel well and stay healthy while you are pregnant. Fit mothers often have shorter labors and fewer interventions at delivery. ALWAYS check with your health care provider before starting or continuing a fitness program during pregnancy.