

Exercise in Pregnancy

Adapted from "Great Expectations", OGA

Whether you are planning a “natural” childbirth with little or no anesthesia, or whether you choose to have anesthesia, or perhaps have decided on a repeat cesarean section, you still need to exercise during your entire pregnancy to develop muscle strength. Exercise also helps with backaches, circulation, insomnia and weight control. If you experience certain complications during your pregnancy, you and your baby may have to adapt to a more sedentary activity level with little exercise. If you are expecting twins, have high blood pressure, an incompetent cervix, or a condition in which your fetus is not growing properly, bed rest or little exercise is recommended. Common sense, listening to your body, and discussing this topic with your doctor are important aspects to guiding your exercise plan in pregnancy.

Walking is an excellent exercise; this does not include trips to the refrigerator, bathroom and bedroom. In general, you do not have to limit your exercise, except when it risks injury to you or your baby. When exercising, drink plenty of water, wear good athletic shoes and a support bra. You should tone down any exercise if you develop shortness of breath, chest pain, extreme fatigue or dizziness. The following are some sensible guidelines to exercise:

- Avoid impact exercise (e.g. high impact aerobics, running)
- Avoid stress to your lower back area
- Limit the intensity of your exercise program to the same levels as you set when you were not pregnant
- Exercise for shorter lengths of times and take frequent breaks
- Reduce weight bearing exercise (running, heavy lifting) in favor of non-weight-bearing exercise (bicycling, swimming)
- In late pregnancy, avoid exercises that may increase your risk for falls
- Avoid doing full sit-ups (bad for your back, pregnant or non-pregnant person) and raising both your legs while lying flat
- Avoid positions where you are lying flat on your back, particularly during the last 3 months of your pregnancy

Exercises

Here are some exercises that help strengthen pelvic and back muscles, those muscles that are essential to support a strong body for pregnancy and labor.

The Pelvic Rock

This is an excellent exercise that is commonly taught in childbirth classes. You can use it during your pregnancy and after delivery, first to give the baby good support and then to help firm your abdominal muscles. You can do it lying on your back, while standing or in the “all fours” position.

Standing Pelvic Rock

Keep your back straight, tighten your buttocks, bend your knees slightly, and rock your pelvis back and forth. This is an actual belly dancing technique, called the hinge. To enjoy your daily exercising routine even more, put on some music and walk around slowly while doing this exercise. Your abdomen and bottom should work like a hinge, while the rest of your upper body remains upright. Once you get the hang of it, move to the music and enjoy!

All-Fours Pelvic Rock

Get on your hands and knees with your legs and hands parallel to the floor. Pull your buttocks down and slightly arch your back, tilting your pelvis forward. Then push your buttocks out and back, tilting your pelvis back. Don't let your back curve in as you rock your pelvis; your back should be straight in the resting position.

Kegel Exercises

This is another excellent exercise to tone muscles in the pelvic area and improve circulation. You should continue to do this exercise after pregnancy to promote more rapid healing and to improve the muscle tone of the vagina. What you do to perform this exercise is to control and relax certain sets of pelvic muscles, one at a time. First, contract your muscles like you are holding back urination. Then, tighten your muscles like you are holding back a bowel movement. Finally, contract the vaginal muscles. It may take some practice to isolate each of these sets of muscles, but keep practicing. These muscles are the exact ones used to help you push effectively during delivery of your baby. Relax and contract each set of muscles separately, contracting them harder and longer each time. Do these anytime, e.g. waiting at a stop light, watching television, talking on the phone.

The Squat

Stand with your back against a wall. Lower your body slowly down the wall, with your hands against the wall, until you are in a squatting position. Keep your feet parallel and your heels flat against the floor. Then slowly raise yourself back up. A variation of the squat: hold onto a heavy piece of furniture that won't tip over, squat down, keeping your heels flat on the floor and your back straight, and letting your knees spread open. Slowly rise back up. This exercise will help strengthen your back and it is good practice for proper lifting of heavy weights. (Always lift heavy objects with your back straight, squatting and using your leg muscles to propel you up.) Practice both types of squat exercises daily.