



ctive living

keeping active

during and after pregnancy



Keeping active during pregnancy

In recent years, pregnant women have increasingly remained active during their pregnancy. Recent work has shown that gentle physical activity is safe and certainly not harmful to the growth and development of your baby. There is growing recognition that being active can result in a range of general health benefits.

- It can improve your heart health and circulation.
- It can help control body weight.
- It can help build stronger bones and prevent osteoporosis.
- It can help you feel generally stronger, fitter and more flexible.
- It can improve your mood, energy and feeling of 'well-being'.

There may also be specific benefits for pregnant women who are regularly active.

- It can improve posture and reduce lower back pain.
- It can reduce the chances of developing high blood pressure or diabetes during pregnancy.
- It can contribute to a quicker recovery after birth.
- It can reduce the risk of circulatory problems in the legs such as thromboses (blood clots) and varicose veins.
- It can contribute to the promotion of mental well-being during pregnancy.
- It can reduce the risk of pre-eclampsia.

What types of physical activity?

It is best to stick to activities that are gentle in both movements and intensity. Those that are **too vigorous** (for example, high impact aerobics, trampolining) or **risky** (for example, contact sports and activities that may result in you losing your balance or falling) **should definitely be avoided**.

Activities you CAN do

Brisk walking
Swimming or aqua aerobics
Stationary cycling

Activities you CAN POSSIBLY do WITH CARE and EXPERIENCE

Safe hiking
Gentle skiing
Gentle yoga and stretching
Gentle cycling

Activities you SHOULD NOT do

Any activity that involves sudden movements or sudden changes in direction

Any activity that may result in shocks to your abdomen

Contact sports like football and hockey

Any activity that will result in you over-heating and becoming dehydrated

After 16 weeks, any activity that involves lying on your back (for example, sit-ups) as this can obstruct the blood flow to the heart

Strenuous or incorrect technique weight training

Scuba diving (baby is not protected from possible decompression sickness)

Getting started

starting from scratch

If you have never done much physical activity or have been inactive for some time, try the following.

1. Begin with as little as 5 minutes of **gentle** activities a day (like walking or swimming).
2. Build up to 15 minutes of continuous activity; try to do this 3 times a week.
3. Try to gradually increase this to 30 minutes, 4–5 times a week.

already active?

If you are already active, the targets set above are sufficient. However, you may need to review the **types** of activity you are doing. Experts recommend that the aim of activity in pregnancy should be to **achieve a good level of fitness NOT to maintain peak fitness.**

when to start?

This will depend on how active you have been before becoming pregnant and how well you feel during the early stages of pregnancy – if you feel up to it, you may be active from the beginning. For others, the best time to begin may be during the second trimester when early tiredness and nausea have lessened.



how intense should activity be?

There are a variety of reasons why your activity should be **moderate** and **not too strenuous**.

- Your heart rate is already increased by 10–15 beats per minute during pregnancy.
- The extra weight you are carrying will make activity harder, place extra strain on muscles and joints and can interfere with balance and coordination.
- Hormones produced during pregnancy relax the ligaments that support your joints, making them more prone to injury.
- Activity that is too strenuous may take blood to the working muscles and away from other important parts of the body.

You can make sure you are not overdoing it by using the 'talk test'!

Can you keep up a conversation while you're in action? If yes, fine! If not, slow down until you can.

You should always spend 5–10 minutes **warming up** (very light and gentle activity and stretching) and 5–10 minutes **cooling down** (gradually decreasing your actions back to resting levels).

Pelvic floor exercises

One particular activity that you can start immediately is **pelvic floor exercises**. There is good evidence that these can reduce the risk of future urinary incontinence.

The muscles supporting your pelvic organs – which include your uterus – need regular strengthening. As well as helping you to push your baby out during the birth, regular pelvic floor exercises help to:

- avoid stress incontinence (release of urine when coughing, sneezing, laughing or running)
- avoid prolapse of the uterus – when the uterus 'drops' a little way into the vagina.



Ask your midwife for referral to an obstetric physiotherapist for expert teaching of these exercises, or contact one yourself (details from <http://www.womensphysio.com>).

You can do them sitting or standing. Here's what to do:

1. Take a breath in, and as you breathe out, imagine that you are trying to stop yourself from passing wind. This will lift and tighten the muscles around your back passage.
2. At the same time, lift and tighten your vaginal muscles, as if you were trying to stop yourself passing urine.
3. Pull your muscles up tighter and higher.
4. Hold for 5–10 seconds and then slowly release – you continue to breathe throughout.

Repeat this sequence **several** times, **several** times a day.

Being safe

It is safe for healthy women having healthy pregnancies to be active during pregnancy. However, women should not be active if they experience the conditions below.

It is NOT SAFE to be physically active when:

- your waters have broken
- you have high blood pressure
- your baby's growth is causing concern
- you have problems with your cervix staying closed ('incompetent cervix')
- you are expecting triplets or more
- your placenta is lying over the cervix (placenta praevia) after 28 weeks
- you have persistent bleeding at any time after three months of pregnancy
- you have uncontrolled type 1 diabetes, thyroid disease, heart or breathing problems.

Similarly, if you experience any of the following when active you should stop immediately and contact your doctor.

You should STOP activity IMMEDIATELY if you:

- feel any pain or discomfort
- experience any vaginal bleeding
- feel dizzy or faint
- find the activity difficult or feel breathless
- feel your heart beating rapidly
- feel any contractions.

There are also some conditions listed below that might cause some concern. Don't automatically rule out activity but consult your doctor or midwife to discuss your particular circumstances.

Discuss activity with your doctor or midwife if you have:

- had a previous pre-term birth
- a history of any previous heart condition
- a history of any previous respiratory condition
- anaemia
- an eating disorder
- twin pregnancy after the 28th week
- any other significant medical condition.

After your baby is here

maintaining activity

It is a good idea to try to keep up the activity you have started but you may have to adjust things slightly.

- With the tiredness of childbirth and dealing with a newborn you may at first need to reduce the length and/or intensity of the activity.
- If you have had a Caesarean delivery and are experiencing discomfort or wound infection you may need to be careful when being active, especially anything that requires abdominal strength.

breastfeeding

'I'm breastfeeding ... is it ok to be active?'

Very hard activity (not moderate) makes the body produce a substance called lactic acid. Some researchers say that this may **temporarily** affect the taste of the milk but **it won't harm your baby**. For those doing moderate activity, this will not be a problem.

If you are doing vigorous activity and baby is not feeding well, it may be worth feeding before you exercise or to postpone a feed for an hour or so afterwards.

Exercising doesn't affect the milk production, and the babies of exercising mums grow normally, even if the mothers are losing weight as part of their programme.



making time for activity

'My baby loves being in the pram – pushing him along is good for me, too. I have made some new friends at a local baby group, and most days, we visit each other at home. It means I get some walking in as well as socialising.'

Nikki, 30.

If you want to be active without your baby, ask about crèche facilities at your local leisure centre – that time off can be important, letting you have a break and giving you the chance to be more active than you'd otherwise be.

'We've joined a parent and baby swim class – it's just splashing really, but the babies seem to love it and it tires them all out! One of the other mums takes hold of my baby while I take the chance to swim a few lengths, and I do the same for her.' Caroline, 25.

Seeing you being active and joining in is a great start for your child. He or she will grow up valuing an active life, and you'll enjoy each other's company.

'It worked for me!'

Christa, aged 37, from Cupar, has three children aged four, six and nine.

'I swam all the way through my pregnancies, right up to the end, and I did a special pregnancy yoga class, too. It definitely made me feel great and I am sure contributed to easy births!'

Remember:

- try to gradually accumulate (build up) 30 minutes' moderate activity on most days of the week
- pick something you enjoy to ensure you keep it up
- stay in touch with your doctor if you're advised to.

Action stations: ideas to try

walking back to happiness

Brisk walking is best – walk as if you are late for an appointment. You need to:

- feel slightly warmer
- breathe a little faster
- feel your heart beating a little faster.

A short and gentle stroll is pleasant, but you need to aim for more, in order to have an impact on your health. Build up your walking, and try to become more active each day.

'I stopped work at six months, and now my partner uses the car for his work ... I've had to start walking everywhere. I've even been checking out places I can go to when my baby's here and we can get out together!' Tracy, 23.

Hint: explore local walks in your area – there could be a number you don't know about. Check out Paths to Health for local walking projects in your area (<http://www.pathsforall.org.uk>; tel 01259 218855).

in the swim

Ask at your local pool for baby and child swimming classes. They'll be able to answer questions about what your baby needs to wear and about times when the pool is quieter. Contrary to popular belief, you can take your baby swimming at any time, both before and after they have their immunisations.

Most swimming pools have adult classes if you need to learn or to improve your swimming. Your local pool may run aquanatal classes especially for pregnant women – the water bears your weight, so even when you are heavier towards the end of pregnancy, swimming can be relaxing as well as a great way to maintain your activity levels. The class should be run by a midwife trained in aquanatal practice or an obstetric physiotherapist with a midwife alongside. For information, visit <http://www.aquanatal.co.uk/Scotland.htm> and <http://www.scottishswimming.com>.



'I've found the class a good way to meet other new mothers. I know we'll meet up after the babies are born.' Susie, 25.

Moving on: ideas, inspiration and information

The National Childbirth Trust is a volunteer-led organisation that offers antenatal education, breastfeeding counselling and postnatal support. Enquiry line: 0870 444 8707. Breastfeeding line: 0870 444 8708.

<http://www.aquanatal.co.uk/Scotland.htm>

<http://www.nctpregnancyandbabycare.com>

<http://www.healthyliving.gov.uk> or call the advice line on 0845 2 78 88 78

<http://www.pathsforall.org.uk>

<http://www.womensphysio.com>

There is online information about physical activity in pregnancy in *Ready, Steady Baby!* <http://www.readysteadybaby.org.uk/pregnancy/physical.htm>.

Other leaflets in the *Active Living* series:

- *Get You and Your Family Moving*
- *Help Yourself to Lose Weight*
- *Help Yourself to Reduce the Risk of High Blood Pressure*

To order, please call 0845 2 78 88 78, or visit www.healthyliving.gov.uk or contact your local health promotion department.

Translations and other formats of these materials are available. Please contact the healthyliving advice line on 0845 2 78 88 78.

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