

What are the benefits of exercise during pregnancy?

Why exercise? It may be hard enough just to get dressed every day if you're feeling bloated and sick to your stomach, but believe it or not, a little effort can leave you feeling energised and perhaps a bit like your pre-pregnancy self. Because exercise promotes muscle tone, strength, and endurance, it can help you carry the weight you gain during pregnancy, prepare you for the physical stress of labour, and make getting back into shape after the baby is born much easier. Before beginning any exercise programme, make sure you follow safety advice, especially now that you're pregnant.

Exercising now will:

Give you more energy

Pregnancy can rob you of energy, but regular bouts of exercise, such as brisk walking will make you feel able to tackle your daily tasks. Exercise strengthens your cardiovascular system, so you don't tire as easily. With muscles that are strong and toned, you need less effort to engage in any activity, be it shopping for food or sitting through meetings at the office.

Help prepare you for the rigours of childbirth

It makes perfect sense: the better shape you're in, the stronger you'll be to cope with labour and the delivery. Giving birth is akin to running a marathon -- it requires stamina, determination, and focus. Keeping physically active during pregnancy is good preparation for the hard work of labour. The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG) states that weight-bearing exercise throughout pregnancy can reduce the length of labour and decrease delivery complications. Additionally, some research has shown that fetuses of women who exercised during labour may tolerate labour better than those of the non-exercisers.

Reduce pregnancy discomfort

Exercise stretches and strengthens your muscles, which helps your body cope better with the aches and pains of pregnancy. Stretches ease back pain, walking improves your circulation, and swimming can strengthen your abdominal muscles.

Fend off the pregnancy blues

Pregnancy is a nine month rehearsal for a big event -- childbirth -- and, after the initial excitement of telling everyone is over, you're left with a lot of waiting. By the sixth or seventh month, pregnancy can become downright tedious. And boredom may result from the increased weight gains and tiredness restricting your social activities. Finding a new activity appropriate for pregnant women may be one answer. "The best thing I can do at the moment to get some relief from feeling as big as a house is to do aquarobics... I find the relaxation session at the end -- when we float to music -- very therapeutic. It also gets you out of the house," says Kim.

Help you sleep better

When you're carrying all that extra weight in front of you, finding an ideal position to sleep in at night can be a real challenge. Exercise will help you work off any excess energy, and will tire you enough to lull you into a deeper, more restful slumber.

Reduce stress and lift your spirits

Pregnancy and having a child is a life-changing, momentous event which can leave you feeling ecstatic yet overwhelmed and anxious at the same time. One good way to shake the blues is by dancing to the beat of a happy tune. One study found that exercise can boost your levels of serotonin, a brain chemical linked to mood, putting you in better spirits. When you're feeling a little down, try putting on your favourite CD and kicking up your heels in the living room, or sign up for a low-impact dance class. Make sure you follow low impact aerobics and let your trainer or teacher know that you are pregnant.

Improve your self-image

Face it: your body's not the svelte thing it used to be, and although you know it's for a good cause, watching the scale creep its way up to numbers you've never seen before can be disheartening. Staying active can make you feel less frumpy. It can also help you shed weight faster postnatally.

Help you get your body back faster postnatally

This alone is reason enough for many women to embark on a pregnancy exercise regime. As Angela puts it, "I am ready to get back to an active lifestyle and reclaim my body!" If you've managed to maintain your strength and muscle tone all through your pregnancy by staying fit, your body will have an easier time bouncing back after you give birth.