

## **PRENATAL EXERCISE**

### **Why It's Important And How To Get Started**

Not long ago, if you saw a pregnant woman jogging or working out, you would have thought she is doing harm her unborn child. We knew little about exercise's effects on child and mother, and advice given to moms-to-be was based on misconceptions and hearsay. Three decades of research have brought clarity to exercising safely during pregnancy and how exercise benefits both mother and child.

Guidelines and recommendations for exercise during pregnancy continue to evolve as more comprehensive research is performed. For example, in 1984, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists published the first exercise guidelines for pregnancy. One guideline stated that the maternal heart rate not to exceed 140 beats per minute. Even though it was revised in 1994, this guideline is still cited today. Current research has found that maternal heart rate is not an accurate indicator to gauge exertion due to the physiological adaptations that occur in a pregnant woman's body.

Today's informed medical experts agree that pregnant women who are free from any obstetric and medical problems should participate in 30 minutes of moderate intensity exercise on most, if not all, days of the week. This recommendation is supported by a position statement from the American College of Sports Medicine; they state: "Healthy, fit pregnant women are well adapted to perform acute bouts of high-intensity, short duration exercise, as well as prolonged exercise at a moderate intensity." (M. Mottola and L. Wolfe) Therefore, even if you have not exercised prior to becoming pregnant, you will find many benefits when you begin a regular fitness routine and maintain it throughout your pregnancy.

Regular exercise, including cardiovascular and strength conditioning, offers many benefits to mothers, both expecting and post-partum. For example, exercise:

- Increases mom's energy
- Improves muscle strength and cardiovascular conditioning, which better prepare mom for labor and delivery
- Limits unnecessary weight gain
- Reduces pregnancy discomforts such as backaches, fatigue, leg cramps, swelling and constipation
- Prevents urinary incontinence
- Improves sleep and reduces stress
- Improves self-image and attitude
- Reduces recovery time after labor and delivery
- Prepares mom for the physical challenges of taking care of her newborn

#### **HOW DO YOU BEGIN?**

If you are experiencing a healthy pregnancy and are new to exercise, start with walking. Walking will maintain your conditioning, and it is safe to walk throughout your entire pregnancy. To get the most benefit from walking, both physically and mentally, take it outdoors and make it brisk. The fresh air will boost your mood, and increasing your heart rate will release endorphins – your body's natural mood enhancer. Start walking 30 minutes a day for a few days per week and gradually increase your frequency to five to six days per week. Duration can be added if you are feeling good and have the time.

If you are a veteran to exercise, the most important questions to answer are: What is your current fitness level? What exercises have you been doing regularly? You will want to maintain your fitness level if your doctor approves activity and you feel okay doing it.

A woman's fitness goals during pregnancy are simple:

- 30 minutes of moderate intensity activity on most days of the week
- Aim to maintain pre-pregnancy fitness levels, in terms of strength, aerobic fitness, flexibility, as well as core muscle and pelvic floor integrity
- Prevent physical stress
- Prevent excessive weight gain
- Adjust to physical changes and build awareness of changes to your body
- Correct minor muscular or postural imbalances
- Do not overheat your core temperature

#### WHAT DOES MODERATE INTENSITY MEAN?

Intensity may be monitored a few ways: heart rate, rate of perceived exertion (RPE), or the “talk test.” We already discussed that a heart rate response is not an effective measure for pregnant women. Monitoring intensity by the rate of perceived exertion (RPE) is preferred. On a scale of 1-10, stay in a zone that feels moderate to you. For most people, this zone is **between a four and six depending on your current fitness level**. The RPE table is described, below:

- 1 No exertion at all
- 2 Very light exertion
- 3 Light exertion
- 4 **Light to Moderate** – you can converse easily with little effort
- 5 **Moderate** – you can converse with some effort
- 6 **Moderate to somewhat difficult exertion** – you can converse but with significant effort, and talking is becoming difficult
- 7 Hard exertion – talking requires a lot of effort and is difficult
- 8 Very hard exertion
- 9 Extremely hard exertion
- 10 Exertion to the point of failure

The “talk test” is another effective measure of keeping exercise at a moderate level. You should always be able to talk while exercising – if you can't talk, slow down and reduce intensity.

The intensity of effort should be judged solely by how you feel and how your body responds during exercise. The most important objective in not exceeding a moderate intensity is to maintain a favorable environment inside the uterus. This means avoid overheating. The following guidelines can help you keep your core temperature increasing too much:

- Always warm up and cool down
- Avoid very warm pools, steam rooms, hot tubs and saunas
- Avoid wearing too many clothes or working out in a room too warm (be aware of air temperature in Spinning/cycling class studios. There should be air circulation.)
- Avoid exercising outdoors in hot, humid conditions
- Always drink plenty of fluids during and after exercising

If you are interested to know about exercising before, during and after pregnancy, check out the book, “Exercising Through Your Pregnancy” by James F. Clapp III. M.D. He is the authority on the subject