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EXERCISE DURING PREGNANCY

You probably know that exercise can strengthen your muscles, make you more flexible, and help you lose weight. But did you know that it can also give you more energy? A long-term program of regular exercise can give you extra energy and help improve your health. Some exercise programs are better than others for reaching your goals.

Ideally, you should be in shape and exercising before pregnancy. Staying active can help reduce discomforts of pregnancy such as backache, constipation, fatigue, bloating and swelling. Because exercise promotes muscle tone, strength, and endurance, it can help you adjust to carrying the extra weight you gain. Exercise can also improve your energy level, mood, and self image.

While there is no evidence that regular exercise improves the outcome of pregnancy, exercise during and after pregnancy helps you get back into shape after your baby is born. There are many exercise programs designed for pregnant women. Your doctor can recommend one. If there are certain exercises you want to do, be sure to check with your doctor first.

Some forms of exercise are too intense or involve positions and movements that are uncomfortable, tiring, or harmful for pregnant women. If you did not exercise a lot before pregnancy, you should not engage in any strenuous activity for more than 15 to 20 minutes. If you were active, you can exercise longer - up to 30 minutes. Avoid jerky, bouncy, or high-impact movements. Because the tissue that connects your muscles and joints softens during pregnancy, you should avoid full sit-ups, double leg raises, and straight-leg toe touches. After the fourth month, avoid lying on your back on the floor for more than a few minutes. If you have any of these symptoms while you are exercising, stop and contact your doctor:

- * Pain
- * Dizziness
- * Shortness of breath
- * Feeling you will faint
- * Vaginal bleeding
- * Rapid heartbeat while resting
- * Difficulty walking
- * Contractions of the uterus
- * No fetal movements

Pregnancy causes many changes in your body. Some of these affect your ability to exercise.

WEIGHT GAIN AND HEART RATE

By the end of your pregnancy, you should have gained 25 to 35 pounds. The extra weight will make you work harder as you exercise at a slower pace. This means you will reach your target heart sooner. When you are pregnant your heart rate should not exceed 140 beats per minute.

You should not exercise to lose weight during pregnancy.

BALANCE

As your abdomen gets larger during pregnancy, your posture and the curve of your spine may change slightly. Late in pregnancy, your baby's weight may lie more on one side of your body than the other.

These changes can limit your ability to take part in activity such as cycling or bowling, which require good balance, or sports such as tennis or softball, which require sudden stops.

OVERHEATING

Although it has not been proven to cause problems, there is concern that prolonged hyperthermia (very high body temperature) during pregnancy may cause birth defects. Because of this uncertainty, avoid overheating when you exercise. Check your temperature (under your arm or rectally) after your usual exercise. It should be less than 101 F. Avoid getting hotter than this, and be sure to drink plenty of fluids. Dehydration raises your body temperature. Prolonged strenuous exercise should probably be avoided, particularly in hot weather.

SPORTS DURING PREGNANCY

To give you an idea of what sports to continue while you are pregnant, here are some guidelines. You should wear a good supportive bra whenever you engage in any of these sports.

WALKING: Brisk walking is always good exercise. If you were not active before you became pregnant, walking is a good way to begin an exercise program.

SWIMMING: If you were used to swimming before pregnancy, you can continue. Swimming is excellent for your body because it uses many different muscles while the water supports your weight. However, you should not dive in the later months of pregnancy. Scuba diving is not advised at any time during pregnancy.

JOGGING: Jogging can be done in moderation if you were jogging before you became pregnant. Avoid becoming overheated, and stop if you feel tired or uncomfortable. Drink water to replace what you lose through sweating.

TENNIS: Moderate games of tennis are generally acceptable if you were used to playing tennis before pregnancy. You may have problems with balance and sudden stops.

GOLF AND BOWLING: These sports are fine for recreation but do not really condition the heart and you may have problems with balance.

SKIING: Because of the danger of serious injuries and hard falls while downhill skiing, stay on safe slopes. You may have problems with balance, although some skiers find the altered center of gravity more favorable. Skiing at a very high altitude is not advised because of the decreased oxygen. A safer choice is cross-country skiing, which is much better for building cardiovascular fitness.

WATER SKIING AND SURFING: You should avoid these sports completely, because you can hit the water with great force. Taking a fall at fast speeds could harm you or your baby.

SCUBA DIVING: Should not be done during pregnancy.

HIKING: This is an acceptable activity if you don't hike to the point of exhaustion, stay well hydrated and stay at altitudes below 9000 feet.