



Oxford University Hospitals
NHS Foundation Trust

Maternity

Physical Activity throughout Pregnancy

Information for Women



Pregnancy is an exciting time to make positive changes to your lifestyle. Many women consider stopping smoking and drinking alcohol, and eating more healthily. It is also important to do some regular moderate physical activity. If you are fit and active this will help you stay healthy and adapt as your body changes.

How can being active help you during pregnancy?

Being physically active:

- improves the fitness of your heart and lungs, which need to work harder when you are pregnant
- helps prevent unnecessary weight gain during pregnancy
- reduces the risk of blood pressure problems
- makes you less likely to develop gestational diabetes (diabetes related to pregnancy)
- improves your mood, reduces stress and helps prevent or treat depression and anxiety
- helps you get a better night's sleep and have more energy
- is a good way to spend time with friends and family, which is important for a healthy and happy lifestyle.

Most importantly, there is no evidence that doing moderate physical activity causes any harm to you or your baby.

Every Activity Counts

What is physical activity and what counts as moderate?

Anything that makes you breathe faster whilst still being able to hold a conversation would be classed as moderate activity. Activity doesn't have to be strenuous to be beneficial and doesn't have to be in a gym or exercise class to count. Every activity counts. It can include:

- swimming
- jogging
- yoga/pilates
- brisk walking (walking the dog/walking the children to school)
- housework/gardening
- cycling
- taking the stairs
- dancing/running around with children.

Not active? Start gradually

I'm new to physical activity. How should I start?

This is the ideal time for you to begin, but start gradually. Build up your activity in as little as 10-minute bouts. Start small and build up.

Find something you enjoy, as this will help you stick with it. Brisk walking is a great way to get more active during pregnancy. You don't need any special clothing or equipment and can build it into your daily routine. Here are more some ideas:

- walking to the shops rather than driving
- getting off the bus a stop earlier and walking the rest of the way
- walking the children to school
- taking a short walk at lunchtime or going for a gentle swim
- taking the stairs rather than the lift
- joining a pregnancy specific exercise class – this is a great way to meet people.

As your fitness increases, aim to walk a little further and enjoy your activity for longer.

If you are new to being physically active, there are a few activities that are less suitable for you, due to the exercise intensity. These include strenuous strength training (weight lifting), racquet sports (squash) and running.

Already active? Keep going

Can I carry on with my pre-pregnancy activities?

Yes, if you are already active you should try to maintain your physical activity levels. However, you may find that you have to adapt or change certain activities during your pregnancy, to find the most comfortable activity. For example, replacing contact sports with non-contact sport or strenuous strength training with a body weight exercise class like yoga or pilates. Remember to find something you enjoy.

How much activity should I be doing?

You should aim to be doing 150 minutes of moderate activity every week. The advice for pregnant women is the same as for any adult. Although this might sound like a lot, it is important to remember:

- You don't have to achieve this level straight way; start gradually. Your levels can be built up over many weeks. Even a small increase in the amount of activity can make a big difference to your health. Something is better than nothing and every activity counts.
- Activity can be broken down into just 10-minute bouts throughout the day. You will soon find it builds up during the week. It could be two 10-minute sessions every day to start with, building up to five 30-minute sessions a week. Some days you'll have a bit more time than others, so you can plan your activity into your week.

Listen to your body and adapt

Whatever you choose to do, you'll need to listen to your body and adapt your activity as your pregnancy progresses. For example, if you were running earlier in your pregnancy, you might need to slow to a light jog or a brisk walk as the weeks go on. Swimming is a helpful activity, especially toward the end of your pregnancy, as it makes you feel weightless and can help reduce the pressure on your joints.

Don't bump the bump

What should I avoid?

- Avoid contact sports or sports where there is a high risk of falls or injury, even if you were doing these before becoming pregnant. This includes skiing, water skiing, off-road cycling, and horse riding.
- You should avoid scuba diving or exercising at an altitude of over 2,000 metres.
- Avoid overheating and very vigorous activity. It is not recommended to exercise for more than 45 minutes, especially in hot, humid conditions.
- Avoid lying flat on your back as your pregnancy progresses, as this could reduce the blood supply returning to your heart from the uterus, putting pressure on your blood vessels. If you go to any classes where you might need to lie flat, you should change your position to incorporate this advice.
- Be aware that pregnancy can affect your balance and you are at higher risk of falls, so you might need additional support while stretching or doing balance type activities.

Do I need any special equipment?

No. It is important to stay cool; wear loose and comfortable clothing. Keep well hydrated – remember to carry water with you. As your breasts increase in size during pregnancy you'll find a well-fitted, supportive bra makes activity more comfortable.

If you go to classes, make sure your instructor knows that you are pregnant.

When should I stop exercising?

If it feels good, keep going – if it is uncomfortable, stop and seek advice.

If an activity is uncomfortable, slow down or take a break and see if you feel better. If you don't, stop the activity and seek medical advice. This is especially important if you notice that you're very breathless without any activity or with minimal activity, or you have chest pains, severe headaches, dizziness, muscle weakness, calf swelling or pain.

You should also contact your midwife or antenatal unit if you have any vaginal bleeding, think your waters have broken, experience contractions or your baby's movements are reduced.

If you have a medical condition or are diagnosed with any complications during your pregnancy, you should check with your doctor or midwife that it's safe to keep doing your current activities. However, for most medical conditions, light/moderate intensity activity is still recommended and promoted.

How to keep motivated

Staying motivated to keep active in pregnancy can be a challenge, especially in the early and later stages of your pregnancy. Here are some tips:

- Try to find local activities that you enjoy (your community midwife may be able to provide a list of local activities that are recommended).
- Build activity into your daily routine.
- Share activity with friends and family.
- Track and record your activities using an activity device/ pedometer – you will be surprised how much you are already doing.
- It can be helpful to set yourself some achievable goals and keep a diary of your activity.

Further information

Here for Health – Health Improvement Advice Centre

Oxford University Hospital drop-in centre for advice and support on healthy living, including physical activity, diet, smoking, alcohol and emotional wellbeing.

Tel: **01865 221 429**

(Monday to Friday, 9.00am to 5.00pm)

Email: **hereforhealth@ouh.nhs.uk**

Website: **www.ouh.nhs.uk/HereforHealth**

Department of Health (GOV.UK) information

Website: **bit.ly/startactiveinfo**

Physical activity for pregnant women

 Helps to control weight gain

 Helps reduce high blood pressure problems

 Helps to prevent diabetes of pregnancy

 Improves fitness

 Improves sleep

 Improves mood

Not active?

Start gradually

Already active?

Keep going



Do **muscle strengthening** activities twice a week

Every activity counts, in bouts of at least 10 minutes

No evidence of harm

Listen to your body and adapt



Don't bump the bump

If you have a specific requirement, need an interpreter, a document in Easy Read, another language, large print, Braille or audio version, please call **01865 221 473** or email **PALS@ouh.nhs.uk**

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