

Physiotherapy Outpatient Department

Patient Information



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Information

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Care of your body during pregnancy

Introduction

Exercise helps us to maintain our strength, flexibility and endurance. Research shows that women who exercise during pregnancy have more energy, feel less anxious and depressed and have improved cardiovascular fitness. Exercise may also decrease the risk of gestational diabetes and hypertension.

What exercises are best?

- Aerobic exercises to gently raise the heart rate and breathing rate such as fast walking, swimming, aqua-aerobics, dancing
- Strengthening / conditioning exercises which involve slow, controlled movements

Exercising safely

During pregnancy, joints may become more flexible due to hormonal changes that affect the supporting ligaments. This means that you may be more at risk of injury to your joints. This can be avoided if, during exercise:

- You warm up and cool down
- Avoid sudden changes in direction

It is also important to avoid getting too hot and breathless. It is recommended that when exercising during pregnancy you take note of 'The Talk Test' - exercising to a point when you are slightly out of breath but can still hold a conversation - you do not need to 'feel the burn'.

Make sure you drink plenty of water and exercise for no longer than 45 minutes at a time. If you do not already exercise regularly then it is advisable to check with your GP or Midwife that it is safe for you to do so. Start with 15 minutes for 3 times a week increasing to 30 minutes for 4 times a week.

Avoid doing exercises lying flat on your back after 16 weeks of pregnancy.

Avoid activities such as kickboxing, judo, squash or scuba diving and high impact activities.

Stop exercising if you have any pain, feel unwell, have any vaginal bleeding or leakage of amniotic fluid and speak to your doctor or midwife.

Seek medical advice before starting to exercise if you have any of the following:

Poorly controlled diabetes	History of miscarriage
If you are at risk of premature labour	Vaginal bleeding
Cervical incompetence	Decreased foetal movements
Placenta Praevia	Anaemia
Problems with your blood pressure	Baby is breech
Sudden swelling ankles, face, hands	Extremely overweight or underweight
Any infectious disease	Heavy smoker
Severe rhesus isoimmunisation	Twins

Abdominal exercises

Your abdominal muscles protect your back and support your growing baby. **As these muscles stretch they become weaker.** Exercise can help maintain strength which will make it easier for you to keep a good posture. Gentle abdominal exercises can also help relieve backache. Avoid strong exercises such as sit-ups.

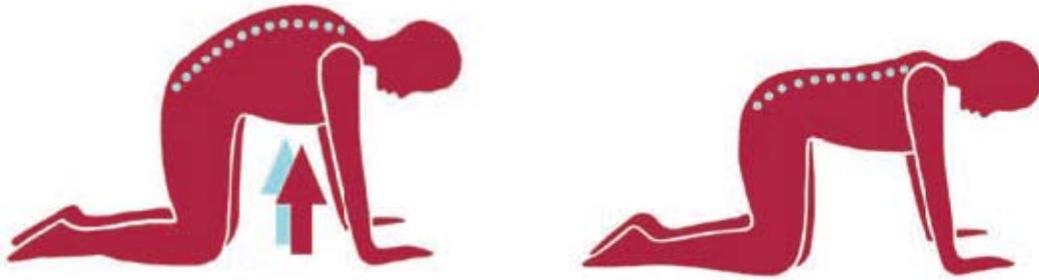
To gently exercise your abdominal muscles:

Kneel on all fours:

1. Pull up your abdominal muscles (tummy button towards spine) keeping your back flat. Hold for five seconds repeat 5 – 10 times. Do not hold your breath.



2. Pull up your abdominal muscles (tummy button towards spine) tighten your buttocks and round your back. Hold for 5 seconds. Repeat 5 – 10 times



Exercise in sitting:

- Sit comfortably in a chair with your back supported by a pillow
- As you breathe out, tighten your abdominal muscles underneath your bump
- Relax
- Repeat 5 - 10 times

Pelvic Floor Exercises

- Sit comfortably on a chair with both feet on the floor
- Imagine you are trying to stop yourself passing wind and the flow of urine at the same time (It feels like a 'squeeze and lift')
- Do not tighten your buttocks or hold your breath when doing this exercise
- Try and hold the lift for up to 10 seconds
- Relax

You will also need to practice exercising the pelvic floor quickly:

Squeeze and lift, then relax

Repeat each of these exercises up to 5 times at a session and do up to 5 sessions daily now and for the rest of your life!

Remember to tighten your pelvic floor muscles before a cough / sneeze or before lifting.

Do not practice these exercises when emptying your bladder. Stopping mid-flow can be used as an occasional test, but **never** first thing in the morning.

Pelvic floor exercises should be carried out **now and daily for the rest of your life!**

Back/Pelvic care in Pregnancy

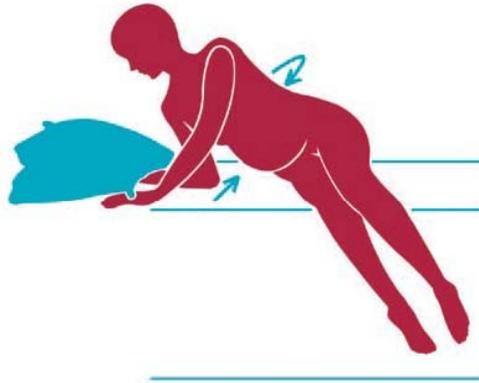
Many women experience back-ache or aches around the lower abdomen (pelvis) during pregnancy. This is due to changes in posture as a result of the growing baby and your enlarging breasts. The growing abdomen causes you to lean backwards which puts more strain on your back.

Hormonal changes, in preparation for childbirth, make your ligaments softer which leaves joints more susceptible to aches and pains.

To help reduce this strain:

Getting out of bed

- As you lie on your back, bend your knees up
- Roll onto your side keeping your knees together
- Push to sit up sideways by pushing with your arms, while
- Dropping your lower legs over the side of the bed
- To return to bed reverse this process



Lying in bed

It is recommended that you do not lie flat on your back, particularly after 16 weeks, because the weight of your 'bump' may press on the major blood vessels in your abdomen. To achieve a comfortable resting and sleeping position:

- Lie on your side with your knees bent up
- Put a pillow under your head, under your tummy and between your knees
- When turning in bed, keep your knees bent up and together

Sitting

The contours of your chair should match and support your spinal curves in a good sitting posture. Your bottom should be set right back on the seat and a firm support in the lumbar region (small of the back) can be used to prevent and relieve back pain.

Some women find that using a gym ball to sit on can be helpful in alleviating back pain because they are able to gently keep the pelvis moving.

Bending down and lifting

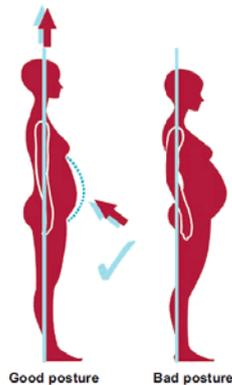
From early pregnancy it is important to lift correctly:

- Bend your knees, keep your back straight, pull your abdominal muscles in and tighten the pelvic floor
- Hold the object close to you
- Lift by straightening your knees and keeping your back straight
- As your pregnancy progresses, heavy lifting should be avoided



Standing and Walking

- Check your posture - stand and walk 'tall'
- Check your work surfaces at home and work so that you stand upright or sit in a good position
- If you need to stand for a long time place your front foot on a raised support to help ease any discomfort



Low back ache, hip pain and groin pain can be helped with physiotherapy. Tell your GP or midwife if you have any concerns and they will refer you to a physiotherapist when necessary. You may be given specific exercises or fitted with a fembrace / tubigrip to ease symptoms until delivery.

Minor problems in pregnancy

Some ladies develop aches and pains during pregnancy. Most of these are caused by your changing posture and increased weight as already discussed.

Here are some common problems with ideas to help:

Leg Cramps

These are usually caused by changes in the chemicals in your body and by the changing pressure in your abdomen.

- Avoid high heeled shoes
- Avoid sitting cross - legged
- Exercise your feet by circling them 10 times in each direction twice a day

Varicose Veins

- Avoid standing still for long periods
- Support tights may help
- Rest regularly with your feet up and legs supported
- Exercise your feet up and down quickly to aid circulation

Rib flare

As your pregnancy progresses and your baby grows up out of the pelvis, your ribs will be pushed slightly upwards and outwards. For some women this can cause discomfort in the ribs or back. To ease this discomfort avoid sitting on low chairs and make sure that you change position frequently. It may be helpful to lift your arm on the side of the pain and bend sideways away from the ache.

Numbness and/or pain in hands and/or fingers

- This can be caused by fluid retention which irritates the nerves in the wrist / hands
- Wrist circling or elevating the hands can help. Ice may also relieve symptoms
- Wrist splints at night can ease some of the symptoms. Ask to see a physiotherapist

Swollen hands and feet may be caused by increased blood pressure.

If you experience swelling with puffy face, headaches or flashing lights, see your GP or midwife AT ONCE!

Further Information

Physiotherapy Outpatient Department telephone number: 01305 255314