

Keeping fit and healthy during your pregnancy

Becoming pregnant can be a trigger for women and their partners to take steps to improve their health. It can be hard to make some healthy choices but the benefits for you and your baby are huge.

Research suggests that physical activity can have positive effects on your mood, self-esteem and body image. It can also help with sleep, stress, depression and anxiety.

Physical activity

Physical activity is different things to different people. It can include being active in everyday life, like walking to the shops, or it can be an organised activity, like going to an exercise class. Moderate physical activity is good for you, is usually safe and doesn't harm your baby's growth and development. Carrying on with your usual exercise routine is normally OK – unless you're into extreme sports – but check with your midwife and tell your instructor. Good activities include swimming and brisk walking, for example going to the shops or visiting relatives, which are gentle in movement and intensity.

How active should I be?

You should aim to be active for at least 30 minutes on at least five days of the week. It doesn't all need to be done in one go though; you can add it up in bouts of 10 minutes if it's easier for you. When being active, you should be able to easily carry on a conversation taking a few breaths in between. It is important to find an activity that you enjoy and can easily fit into your daily routine.

Good posture

You can strengthen your back and avoid backache by learning to 'stand tall'. Stand with your feet apart and let the weight of your body sink through to your feet. Imagine a string from the top of your head drawing you up towards the ceiling. Feel your spine lengthening.

When you stand, remember this posture. It helps to stop you slumping and sagging into your tummy.

Try not to sit for long periods of time – get up and move around every 30–60 minutes. When sitting, tuck a small cushion into the small of your back to help you to sit up straight and comfortably. This takes the strain away from your back.

Yoga

Yoga is generally a safe and helpful form of exercise during pregnancy. The poses gently stretch the body and the breathing methods and emphasis on relaxation encourage peace and calm.

If you belong to a class, tell the teacher you are pregnant. If you want to start yoga, find a class specifically for pregnant women. Local authority exercise classes usually include yoga.

Everyday activities

Physical activity can easily be added in to everyday life. Here are some examples to help you get active every day:

- Take the stairs instead of the lift.
- Walk or cycle (in your early pregnancy) to work instead of taking the car.
- Walk the dog.
- Try gardening.
- Do housework in between your favourite programme.

Classes

Choose a class especially designed for expectant mothers. As long as you choose exercises which are low impact, you should be able to continue your routine throughout your pregnancy, gradually tapering off towards the end.

Activities to avoid

Sports with a high potential for hard falls or ones where you might be thrown off balance are not a good idea for pregnant women. These include horse riding, downhill skiing, gymnastics and waterskiing. Additionally, most GPs and midwives recommend giving up cycling after six months, even if you're an experienced cyclist, because of the potential for falls. You can, however, use an exercise bike for as long as you like. If you are already active and have any concerns, just check with your midwife whether it is safe to continue.

Swimming

Even if you haven't done much exercise before your pregnancy, you'll find swimming is easy. The water supports your whole body, so there's almost no risk of injury, and you can tone and stretch all over.

- Many pools run 'aquanatal' classes, where you learn movements and exercises designed for pregnancy. These should be run by a specially trained midwife, or an obstetric physiotherapist with a midwife present.
- In any class, you should be given the chance to warm up with some gentle limb stretches, followed by movements which work round the body, and then maybe a swim.

Walk to the shops or to work – or if that's too far, get off the bus a stop earlier or park a bit further away.

at a glance

✦ If you already do a fitness class, tell your instructor that you are pregnant.

✦ Aquanatal classes are just for pregnant women and should be led by a specialist. Your leisure centre or council swimming pool should be able to give you details.

Take the stairs instead of lifts or escalators.

Make a point of taking time every few hours to do something active, even if it's just walking round the block.

