

get a move on

Keeping physically fit and active during pregnancy has many benefits for you and your baby. by heather hudson



Keeping fit during pregnancy will help you lose your "baby weight" faster.

When Anh Thu Hoang brought home her first baby from the hospital she felt like she'd been steamrolled by the proverbial Mack truck. Sluggish, sore and utterly exhausted, she wondered if she was ever going to feel – and look – like the energetic and active woman she once was.

Before pregnancy, she hit the gym at least four times a week, participating in everything from kickboxing to aerobics to weight training. Physical fitness had always been an important part of her life. But fear of complications restricted her activity level during pregnancy. "I tried to get out and exercise but I was careful to keep it not too strenuous since all the pregnancy books I read discouraged demanding regimens on a pregnant body. For someone at my previous activity level, there is no doubt I took it way too easy."

Hoang credits her 60-pound weight gain and long and difficult weight loss process to the "dumbing down" of her exercise routine. After six

months of arduous workouts at least three times a week, including a Pilates trainer, she was close to her pre-pregnancy fitness level.

Determined not to take the same path in her second pregnancy, Hoang resolved to maintain the fitness she worked so hard to regain. Instead of poring over outdated self-help books, she listened to her body when it was tired, hungry or uncomfortable but only after challenging herself one step further.

"I took a prenatal fitness class once a week and used sporting events to keep me motivated. During my first trimester, I rode in a 75 km charity bike ride. In my second trimester, with the approval of my obstetrician, I ran a 10 km race and, at 20 weeks into my pregnancy, I competed in a mini-triathlon."

Hoang says her two pregnancies were like night and day. She claims she had more energy during her second pregnancy, despite chasing after an active toddler, gained half the weight she did in her first pregnancy and experienced a quick and manageable labor with her second child.

"This time I was up and at 'em when my son was 2 days old. I took my daughter to her Gymboree class when he was 4 days old and started running a couple of miles on the treadmill when he was 2 weeks. I felt great."

The facts on exercise

Though exercising during pregnancy was once considered high-risk, new research is changing attitudes toward continuing an active lifestyle during pregnancy. Regular exercise is now shown to be highly beneficial for women with low-risk pregnancies. Advantages to exercising include:

- Greater blood volume in exercising women, which usually means more oxygen for the baby.
- A more manageable labor due to an increased release of beta- >

endorphins and a better conditioned mind/body connection.

- Help in preventing gestational diabetes and preeclampsia (high blood pressure).

- Better weight regulation, fewer back aches and other discomforts. According to a 1990 study by Dr. James Clapp out of Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, exercising women enjoyed “shorter, easier labors (on average two hours less labor time) with less medical intervention (24 percent less Cesarean sections and 14 percent less usage of forceps), higher neo-natal APGAR scores and quicker recoveries.”

- Bigger babies. Researchers from the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology in Cleveland found that women who exercised three to five times a week had babies that were heavier, longer and had better overall weight and body fat than those born to inactive mothers.

- A bigger placenta, which is the baby’s substitute lung, kidney and liver, and transfers oxygen and nutrients to him/her. Clapp found that when women exercised, the placenta grew almost a third faster in mid-pregnancy and had about 15 percent more blood vessels and surface area at term.

Expert advice

Prenatal fitness specialist and mother Andrea Page can attest to the effects exercise can have on a pregnancy. As founder of FitMom, a Canadian fitness program offering a variety of classes specially designed for pre- and postnatal women, she’s seen hundreds of exercising women “soar” through pregnancies.

“When I look at women who are more active, I definitely see fewer problems associated with their pregnancies. The women who reduce their exercise regimens tend to have excessive weight gain and more complications such as hyper-

tension, lower back pain and other muscular imbalances.”

And Page knows firsthand of what she speaks. Like Hoang, she’s experienced two vastly differing pregnancies. Before the birth of her first son six years ago, she heeded the conventional wisdom of the time and cut way down on exercise. She gained 55 pounds, developed pregnancy-induced hypertension and gave birth to a 5-pound baby a month prematurely.

Contrast that with her second pregnancy just over two years ago,

during which she continued her regular exercise regimen – including training other pregnant women – gained 25 pounds and had a heavier, healthier baby born at term. She believes exercise was the key to her experience the second time around. “My story corroborates the leading research out there: Exercise is crucial to the health and well-being of both pregnant mothers and their babies.”

However, other experts are not convinced that exercise is the cure-all to a smooth pregnancy and easy birth and recovery. Dr. Julia Alleyne, a sports medicine physician at the Centre for Advanced Research on Exercise at Sunnybrook and Women’s College Health Sciences Centre in Toronto, rejects the idea that exercise can make or break a healthy pregnancy. “As every child is different, so is every pregnancy,” she says. “Complications can occur naturally or be stimulated by other factors, such as other health problems or emotional issues.”

Yet Alleyne agrees that in normal, low-risk pregnancies, exercise is both mentally and physically beneficial, providing women with the strength, stamina and sense of well being they need as their bodies change and prepare for labor.

Page goes further, contending that unless you’re exercising at an exceedingly high level, it’s not necessary to modify your normal routine much at all and even a serious athlete may continue as long as she works with her physician or midwife. She believes that it is possible to be too easy on yourself during pregnancy and warns women not to use their new condition as an excuse to be sedentary.

“I tell my students that every pregnant mother is her own expert. Just listen to your body, it’ll tell you when it’s not able to continue. As long as you’re tuned in to yourself, there’s no reason you shouldn’t continue to challenge yourself,” Page says. ■

Tips for exercising during pregnancy

Drink lots of water.

Eat a healthy, well-balanced diet.

Wear clothes that allow you to dissipate heat.

Use the talk test to measure heart rate intensity. You should be able to talk for one to two minutes without trouble.

After the first trimester, avoid abdominal exercise in the supine position (on your back).

Avoid contact sports and activities that can throw you off balance.

Swimming, biking, running, walking, yoga, aerobics and resistance training are all good exercise choices for pregnant women.