

fit to deliver

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Exercising your way to a healthier, happier pregnancy, labor & recovery



Using an exercise ball can increase your flexibility and help you become more in-tune with your ever-changing balance, experts say.

For some, exercise is a way of life. For others, it's a dirty word they'd rather ignore. But whether you're an avid athlete or you feel walking the dog is an unnecessary exertion, the truth is that all women can benefit from exercises to help prepare for the journey of childbirth; from labor through recovery to regaining your figure. With a little effort each day, not only will your body be better prepared, your mind will too.

By all accounts, giving birth is no cakewalk. "Labor is a physical endeavor. It's not passive," says Dr. Ellen Kruger, OB/Gyn with the Ochsner Health System. Pregnancy changes our bodies, placing new boundaries on flexibility, balance and endurance. Instead of fighting these changes, we can embrace them, using targeted exercises and respecting our new limits to make the physical challenges of labor far less daunting.

Happily, pregnancy means crunches are out, but some simple core training helps provide much-needed lower back strength to support your growing abdomen. "Even something as simple as contracting your core when you stand up straight can help," suggests Dr. Kruger. It's easy to let your shoulders fall forward and your back hunch as your pregnancy progresses, which can put pressure on weak areas. Keeping your hips tucked underneath you, opening your shoulder blades and taking a few deep breaths throughout the day will help maintain a strong alignment. *What to Expect When You're Expecting* offers great suggestions for neck, back, pelvic, shoulder and leg stretches with diagrams and easy-to-follow directions.

Your joints are more flexible and less solid during pregnancy, making extreme stretching potentially dangerous. Local physical therapist Beth Winkler-Schmit of Magnolia Physical Therapy, suggests relaxation and yoga techniques for the lower back and for increased flexibility. "A lot of exercises on all fours, such as cats and camels [simple yoga stretches] help, because your belly is not putting weight on your back," says Winkler-Schmit. She also suggests sitting on an exercise ball, rocking forward and back, and side to side to help increase flexibility, tone your abdomen and enhance awareness of your ever-changing balance.

There is much written about the infamous Kegel exercises, developed by Dr. Arnold Kegel. Kegels help strengthen the muscles surrounding the opening of your vagina in preparation for the pushing phase of labor and to help decrease the possibility of organ prolapse and urinary incontinence after birth.

Proper Kegels are achieved by tightening only the muscles of your vagina as though stopping the flow of urine. According to the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology (ACOG: www.acog.org), Kegels are only effective "when the right muscles are

used, the "squeeze" is held long enough, and enough repetitions are done." Do several sets, holding each squeeze for 10 seconds (pending the advice of your practitioner). If you start now, you'll be half way done by the time you finish this article.

Endurance is also an important aspect of childbirth and recovery, even for women with planned cesarean sections. "Women who are in good shape through exercising do tend to be more up to the physical challenge of labor," explains Esther Rose Lerman, a midwife with the Kaiser Permanente Medical Foundation. "Strong endurance not only helps prepare you for labor; it helps prevent unnecessary weight gain, and aids in a quicker recovery." As with any exercise, it is important to talk with your practitioner to find out what is best for you. Women at high risk of premature labor often have more restrictions.

Good aerobic exercises to help with endurance include non-weight-bearing activities such as brisk walking, using stationary bikes, and most notably, swimming—a great low-impact workout with full-body benefits.

Dr. Kruger suggests, as a general rule, exercising at 80 percent of your pre-pregnancy levels. (ACOG offers the same figure for tracking heart rate from pre-pregnancy to pregnancy.) "You can do your exercise," she advises, but adds, "Those days you are feeling

wonderful and motivated and want to throw in extra, don't do it. Do what you do and maybe a tiny bit less." It is generally advisable to aim for about 30 minutes of exercise a day.

Include relaxation exercises into your routine as well. These can be as simple as closing your eyes and imagining your favorite place, or taking slow, steady breaths: inhaling through your nose and relaxing your muscles as you exhale.

After childbirth it's important to remain active, but start back slowly. You want to give your body time to heal without letting yourself become stagnant. Low back pain is inevitable from picking up and carrying your newborn and assuming the constant posture of breastfeeding. "Definitely remember deep breathing because that is an exercise in itself," says Winkler-Schmit. "Your lower back muscles are attached to the lower ribcage, so if you are having lower back pain, deep breathing can actually help to expand and contract and help those muscles."

The pains of labor are a natural part of childbirth, but by keeping active while respecting your limits you can be confident that you have prepared well. So stand up straight, breathe deep, and as Dr. Kruger likes to tell her patients, "be a tight ass." Your body will thank you. ✿

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