

Pregnancy & Fitness

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By Kathleen Hall

We all know how important exercise is to our overall health and well-being. But what about when you're pregnant? Is it safe for you? For the baby?

"Across the board, fitness lends itself to happier, healthier pregnancies," said Alice Hirata, MD, a physician at Virginia Women's Center. "It protects the size of your baby, makes you stronger for carrying and for labor and delivery, and helps you control your weight."

Dr. Hirata can speak with authority – medically and personally. A recreational runner, Dr. Hirata continued to run through both her pregnancies, stopping at some point in her third trimester. She has patients who are also able to safely run while pregnant.

If strength for labor and weight control aren't compelling enough reasons for exercising, Elizabeth Peterson, a registered dietician, medical nutrition therapist, nutrition consultant, and health educator, offers some additional benefits: "It can prevent gestational diabetes, reduce stress, improve your mood and sleep patterns, and reduce your risk of disease."

Peterson said some studies have shown that fit women have faster labors, require less inducing, and are less likely to need an epidural or operative birth.

Dr. Hirata encourages women to begin an exercise before becoming pregnant, if possible, so they can begin pregnancy with an increased level of fitness. Whether you are continuing an exercise routine, or just beginning one, it's very important to consult early and regularly with your physician.

"Pregnancy is a very complex physical state," said Peterson, "and precautions are needed." Never exercise to the point of exhaustion, she advises. Avoid contact sports and those that require jumping or put you risk falling, especially later in your pregnancy. Stretch before and after exercise. And, after about three months, don't do abdominal exercises or those that require you to lie on your back.

"Listen to your body," Peterson said. "It will give you a signal if it's time to reduce activity." Using a perceived exertion scale is a good barometer for judging exercise intensity. Try to maintain a moderate intensity, around a five or six on a 10-point scale.

"We need to cut ourselves some slack [during pregnancy]," said Dr. Hirata. "If you're fatigued or achy, it's perfectly fine to run/walk [instead of just running]. And there are times when a nap is a perfectly good alternative."

"Be careful about hydration," Dr. Hirata cautions, "and stay under your maximum heart rate. You should be able to talk comfortably. I tell athletes this is a time of maintenance and they should not be trying to push themselves."

There are many fitness classes geared specifically for pregnant women and most women enjoy the camaraderie and support of others who are going through the same process.

Bon Secours offers pregnancy fitness classes through its Love and Learn program (www.bonsecoursloveandlearn.com/bonsecours/ for schedule and descriptions). Classes include pre and postnatal Pilates and yoga and, in conjunction with the Midlothian YMCA, a Pregnancy Plunge water class.

Don't stop exercising after the baby comes. Dr. Hirata says resuming your exercise routine — once you get the okay from your doctor — is also a good way to get a bit of yourself back. Too many women don't continue to make this a priority after the baby comes.

Postnatal classes offer the best of all worlds: a safe workout and quality time with your child. Dr. Hirata's running patients push their babies in a jogging stroller. "It's great for working moms. You're still exercising but you're also spending time with your kid." For a different twist on the subject, try Bon Secours' Rollerbaby class, which consists of walking intervals while pushing your baby in a stroller.

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Kegel exercises help strengthen the pelvic floor muscles and reduce incontinence (leakage of urine) caused by the extra weight on the bladder. Imagine you are urinating and pretend to stop the flow. Don't do this while you are actually urinating because it may prevent you from fully emptying your bladder. Squeeze the muscles, hold for a few seconds, and then release. Be sure to only tighten these muscles and don't hold your breath.

[Resources]

Exercising Through Your Pregnancy, Dr. James Clapp

Prenatal Fitness, Exercising During Pregnancy, Catherine Cram

www.Pregnancytoday.com

Videos: Kathy Smith and Denise Austin offer pregnancy workouts