

INFORMATION FOR
PREGNANT WOMEN

FIT
for
Pregnancy

*Essential exercises and
helpful advice to get you
into shape for
the birth of your baby*



ASSOCIATION OF CHARTERED PHYSIOTHERAPISTS IN WOMEN'S HEALTH

fit for pregnancy

Your body will change a great deal during your pregnancy.

This leaflet is designed to help you reduce the strain on your body and make you more comfortable.

Further advice may be available from your local women's health physiotherapist, usually through antenatal classes in your area.

If you encounter problems earlier, ask your doctor or midwife to refer you to a specialist physiotherapist.

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Exercise and pregnancy

Mild to moderate exercise is good for you and your developing baby. Brisk walking and swimming (or aquanatal classes) are excellent. Being pregnant does, in itself, provide physical challenges which can improve your level of fitness. Avoid taking up new types of exercise when pregnant. Stick to familiar activities and remember that as your pregnancy progresses it is natural to slow down. Any activity which produces significant pain should be avoided. Pelvic pain may be experienced at the front and/or back of your pelvis.

When exercising remember to:

- drink plenty of water to avoid dehydration
- work within your own limits to avoid getting too hot or breathless
- listen to your body – **stop** exercising if you are uncomfortable, tired or feeling unwell
- always avoid high impact activity when pregnant, eg running, jumping
- find an exercise class which caters specially for pregnancy if possible
- be cautious in the gym – ask for help on which machines to use and how to use them correctly
- avoid being competitive
- avoid contact sports

Pelvic joints and spine

Your pelvis consists of three bones and three joints; one of these joints is at the front and two are at the back. The bones form a protective cavity or basin for your bladder, womb and bowel. The spine consists of many small bones (vertebrae). The joints of the spine and pelvis are supported by ligaments and muscles, which provide stability and help to maintain a good posture.

Hormonal changes during pregnancy soften these ligaments and the joints become less stable; the resulting increases in movement can lead to aches and pains in the back and pelvis. Because of the weight of your baby and your altered centre of gravity, your posture will also change, which may place further strain on your back.

Here are some suggestions which may help you to reduce the risk of strain and discomfort:

- sit correctly, and wherever possible, sit rather than stand when performing various tasks, eg ironing, preparing the vegetables



- ensure your work surface is at the correct height, both at home and at work

- when shopping, carry evenly weighted loads in each hand
- try to avoid carrying your toddler on one hip; if you must do so, alternate the hip you use
- use correct technique for lifting and avoid heavy loads



- find a comfortable sleeping position, and ensure that you get in and out of bed correctly



- use your abdominal/tummy muscles (as described below) for support and protection of your spine and pelvis for *all* activities which require effort

If you experience significant pelvic joint pain seek medical advice or a referral to the obstetric physiotherapist from your GP or midwife.

Abdominals

Your tummy muscles will stretch naturally as your baby grows. As they stretch they become weaker. It is important, therefore, to use these muscles correctly to maintain

their strength, to provide support for your back and your baby and to encourage good posture.

Your body has its own natural 'support' tummy muscle which acts like a corset to support your growing baby.

How to find the 'support' muscle

Place your hand on the lower part of your tummy under your bump.

Breathe in through your nose.

As you breathe out, gently draw **in** your lower tummy **away** from your hand towards your back, then relax.

Repeat several times.

To progress, repeat as above but keep your muscle **drawn in** while you continue to breathe in and out normally a few times.

Feel the muscle working under your hand, hold for a maximum of 10 seconds and repeat for a maximum of 10 times. Repeat 6-8 times during the day. Feel the muscle supporting your baby. Try to use this muscle during any activity requiring effort, eg vacuuming, shopping, getting up from a chair.

Pelvic floor muscles

The 'pelvic floor' is the name given to the muscles which lie at the base of your pelvis forming a 'floor'. It supports the pelvic organs, including the womb and your baby.

A strong pelvic floor helps you to control your bladder and bowel, and may enhance sexual intercourse.

The increasing weight of your baby during pregnancy, followed by the delivery, may weaken the pelvic floor. The support it gives is reduced and you may leak urine when you exert yourself, especially after the baby is born. To try to prevent this you should exercise the pelvic floor every day.

How to find your pelvic floor

Imagine that you are trying to stop yourself passing wind and at the same time trying to stop your flow of urine in mid-stream. The feeling is one of 'squeeze and lift', closing and drawing up the back and front passages.

Continue the lift for as long as you can (up to 10 seconds). Release and rest for several seconds. Repeat as many times as you can (up to a maximum of 10 repetitions at a time). This will help to build up the endurance of your pelvic floor muscles.

It is important to do this:

- without tightening your buttocks
- without holding your breath
- without squeezing your legs together

You should find that your tummy 'support' muscle is working at the same time as your pelvic floor muscles. ***Try to practise these exercises 6-8 times a day.***

For maximum support and protection throughout the day try, whenever you are active, to draw up the pelvic floor a little way, keeping it taut.

It is also important that the muscles are able to react quickly to stop you leaking when you cough or sneeze. Practise tightening hard and quickly, then relaxing. Do this rapidly several times. *Practise these exercises 1-2 times a day.*

Both these pelvic floor exercises can be practised anywhere, any time and in any position. It helps to associate doing them with activities you do regularly every day, eg boiling the kettle, sitting at red traffic lights, in meetings, waiting for the bus, watching TV or after, but **not** while you empty your bladder.

Practise pelvic floor exercises for ever!

How to rest comfortably

Relaxation is a technique you can learn to use during your pregnancy and afterwards. Practising it during your pregnancy will help you to rest more effectively and comfortably and can also help to get you back to sleep if you wake during the night. Antenatal classes should provide guidance on relaxation techniques.

Sometimes people feel extremely tired or develop aches and pains, which can be related to tension. Tension causes an increase in blood pressure, heart rate, and

rate of breathing which can lead to feelings of panic and loss of control. Using relaxation can help to reduce, or prevent, tension from building up. Stress and tension are common in pregnancy, especially as many women choose to work, look after children or are involved in other commitments, into late pregnancy.

Some women who practise relaxation and are able to use it during labour may be able to cope better with the pain and feel more in control.

Minor problems

Leg cramps

These are due to changes in body chemistry and changing pressures in the abdomen. Your doctor may be able to give you medication to help, so do ask.

Wearing very high-heeled shoes or sitting cross-legged can make leg cramps worse so do avoid this.

Some women find that it helps to exercise their feet before going to bed: circle the feet at least ten times briskly in each direction. Try stretching the legs out straight and pulling your feet and ankles hard up towards you, keeping them pulled up for a few moments, just before you go to sleep.

Swollen ankles and varicose veins

Rest, lying down with your entire legs (not just your feet) supported in a raised

position. From about four months of pregnancy, it is more comfortable for you and your baby if you can avoid lying flat on your back; make sure that your head and shoulders are supported by pillows in a slightly raised position. Vigorously exercise your feet up and down for at least thirty seconds at a time. Avoid standing for long periods and consider wearing support tights.

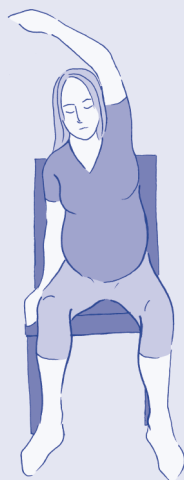
Numb, tingling or painful, hands and fingers

This may be a problem, often at night or first thing in the morning, and is due to extra fluid in the body, which increases pressure at the wrist. The physiotherapist may supply you with wrist supports to wear at night, which can help to reduce the symptoms.

If swollen ankles and/or fingers are accompanied by puffy face, headaches or flashing lights, seeks medical advice at once.

Ribflare

This is the name given to discomfort over your lower ribs. It is due to your growing baby pushing your ribs away from their normal position. Try to change position frequently and avoid sitting on low chairs



and in other positions which bring your ribs close to your pelvis. You may find temporary relief by lifting your arm on the affected side and bending sideways away from the ache.

Emotional changes

The hormone changes in pregnancy may lead to emotional ups and downs and sometimes forgetfulness. After the birth these problems will disappear gradually. Help is available from your midwife or GP, if you are worried about coping with these emotional changes.

Finding a specialist physiotherapist

This leaflet has been produced by the Association of Chartered Physiotherapists in Women's Health. ACPWH members are located in most main maternity units and have the postgraduate training needed to help you. If you do not know an ACPWH physiotherapist in your area, send a stamped addressed envelope to the address below, with details of the problem you are experiencing.

**Association of Chartered Physiotherapists
in Women's Health**

**c/o The Chartered Society of Physiotherapy,
14 Bedford Row, London, WC1R 4ED.**

Telephone: 0207 306 6666

Facsimile: 0207 306 6611

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