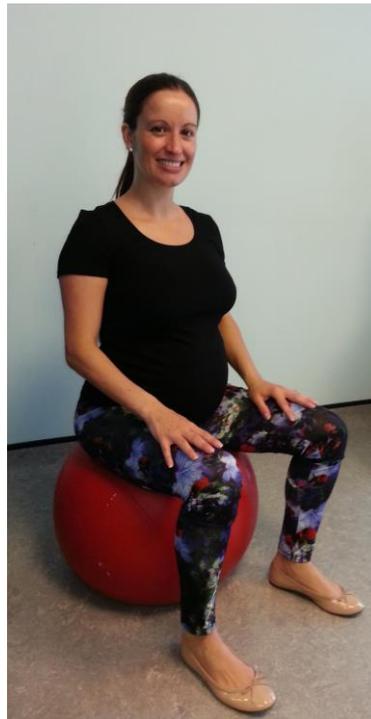




# Exercise during pregnancy

## A patient's guide

Women are encouraged to start or continue exercising in pregnancy to enjoy the benefits it brings. In most cases, exercise is safe and beneficial for mother and baby during pregnancy.



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*Illustrations courtesy of Robyn Pathmanandam, Whittington Health*



## What are the benefits of exercise?

Regular exercise can:

- maintain cardiovascular fitness
- help maintain a healthy weight
- improve energy levels
- improve sleep
- reduce stress, anxiety and depression
- improve circulation
- lower the risk of varicose veins
- reduce swelling of extremities
- maintain strength and flexibility
- improve your balance and co-ordination
- improve your posture
- reduce physical complaints e.g. low back pain
- reduce constipation
- prevent and treat pelvic floor dysfunction
- prevent and control gestational diabetes mellitus (a type of diabetes that affects women during pregnancy)
- prevent and control high blood pressure
- reduce the length of labour
- reduce delivery complications
- help in postnatal recovery

## What type of exercise is best?

Most exercise is beneficial. It should be something that you enjoy, feel comfortable doing and can work into your daily routine. Over-exertion may result in overheating which can affect the development of the baby, so exercise safely at moderate intensity.

Low impact exercise is recommended to reduce strain on your joints. Examples of low impact exercise include:

- walking
- exercise bike
- swimming
- cross-trainer
- aqua-aerobic classes
- low-impact aerobic classes
- endurance (light to moderate) weights
- pelvic floor muscle training
- deep abdominal (transversus abdominus) muscle training
- antenatal Pilates
- antenatal Yoga



During exercise, it is safe to lie on your back for a short time as long as you feel well. If you feel unwell or breathless, turn to lie on your side. It is best to alternate exercises on your back with exercises on your side.

If you have any medical problems or a body mass index (BMI) over 40, please seek advice from a healthcare professional before beginning an exercise regime.

### **What type of exercise should I avoid?**

You should avoid high impact exercise, contact sports and other activities that may result in a heavy fall. You should avoid exercising in high or low atmospheric pressure. Examples of exercise to avoid include:

- running
- cycling
- jumping
- step aerobics
- ball sports
- racquet sports
- skiing
- scuba diving
- walking at high altitude (greater than 1800m)
- heavy weights

You should stop exercise and seek medical advice if you experience any unusual symptoms such as excessive shortness of breath, chest pain or palpitations, dizziness, painful uterine contractions, abdominal or pelvic pain and excessive fatigue.

### **Advice for exercising**

- Stop and rest if you feel too hot
- Avoid spas, saunas, solariums, and exercising in hot conditions
- Drink water while you exercise
- Don't exercise for more than 60 minutes at a time
- Aim for 150 minutes of moderate intensity exercise, spread out over a week
- Complete muscle strengthening activities at least twice a week
- Keep your heart rate below 150 beats per minute
- Wear a supportive wireless bra, ideally with wide straps
- Wear supportive shoes (trainers)
- Wear loose, breathable clothing
- Avoid lying on your back for more than 10 minutes
- Eat carbohydrates at least 30 minutes before exercising



## Cardiovascular fitness

If you are not used to exercising, begin with 15 minutes of continuous exercise three days a week. Gradually increase to 30 minutes of exercise four to seven days a week. When exercising, it is important to warm up and cool down adequately.

The following are methods which will help you exercise safely at a low to moderate intensity:

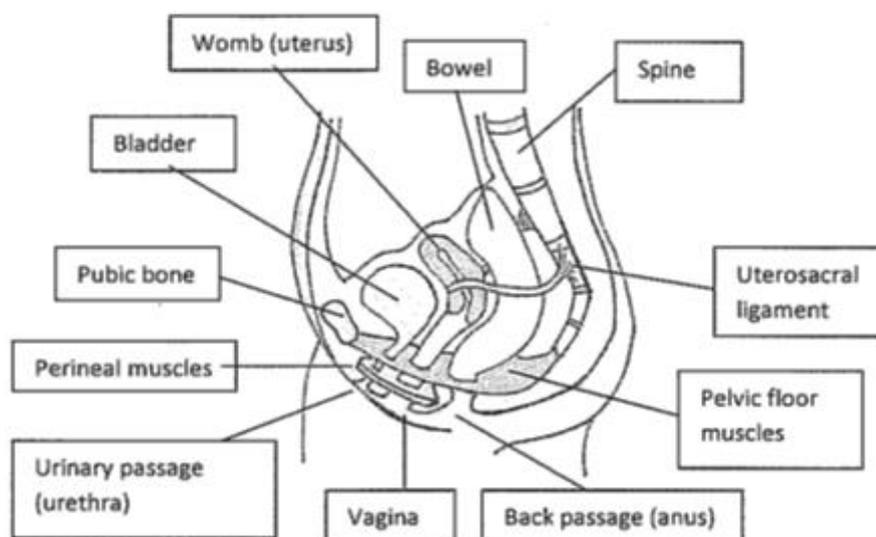
- 'conversational puffing'- If breathlessness prevents you from talking then you should slow down. If you are not puffing at all you should speed up.
- target your exertion level at 'somewhat hard'. 'Hard' is too high and 'fairly light' is too low.
- exercise within your target heart rate (beats per minute) range according to age:

Less than 20 years:	140-155
20-29 years:	135-150
30-39 years:	130-145
Over 40 years:	125-140

## Pelvic floor muscle exercises

The pelvic floor muscle is a sling of muscles which stretch like a hammock from the front to the back of the pelvis to support the bladder, womb, bowel, and low back and pelvic joints. The pelvic floor muscles close off the bladder outlet (urethra), vagina and back passage (anus), and help to position your baby during labour.

## Pelvic floor



The increasing weight of your baby during pregnancy and vaginal delivery may weaken the pelvic floor muscles. Pelvic floor muscle dysfunction, particularly problems controlling your urine and bowel movements, is more common in pregnancy and following birth. Exercising the pelvic floor muscles can prevent and treat these problems.

It is important to do this exercise while breathing normally and with a relaxed stomach. You can exercise in any position. Supported positions are easier, while upright positions and movement are more challenging.

Tighten and lift your pelvic floor, closing and drawing up the back passage, vagina and urinary passage, as if trying to stop yourself passing wind, gripping the vaginal walls together and stopping the flow of urine at the same time. The pelvic floor muscles should move upwards and forwards toward the pubic bone.

There are two pelvic floor exercises:

1. Tighten and lift your pelvic floor muscles for up to 10 seconds, then relax. Repeat 10 times.
2. Tighten and lift your pelvic floor muscles quickly, then immediately relax fully. Repeat 10 times.

You should complete these exercises four to six times a day. It may take two months to notice any benefit and up to six months to see real improvement.

Protect yourself:

- Tighten and lift your pelvic floor muscles before coughing, sneezing or exerting yourself
- Tighten and lift your pelvic floor muscles gently (half effort) when walking for a long time

See our fact sheet: [Understanding Pelvic Floor Muscle Exercises for Women](#)

### **Deep abdominal (transversus abdominus) muscle exercises**

The deep abdominal muscle stretches around the abdomen and joins into the back muscles to form a corset of support for your baby, back and pelvis.

As the baby grows in pregnancy, the abdominal muscles will stretch and become weaker but you can safely exercise the deep muscles to improve your support. You should avoid sit ups until six weeks after giving birth.

This muscle helps to prevent and treat low back and pelvic girdle pain which are common pregnancy-related physical complaints. It will reduce excessive abdominal stretching and improve your tummy shape after giving birth. It is an important pushing muscle for labour.

It is important to do this exercise while breathing normally and without excessive tension in your abdomen. You can exercise in any position. Supported positions are easier, while upright positions and movement are more challenging.



Draw in your deep abdominal muscles, below the belly button, as if trying to tuck in your lower stomach to fit into a belt or tight trousers. Check in a mirror – your belly button should move directly back towards your spine or downwards (not upwards).

Deep abdominal exercise:

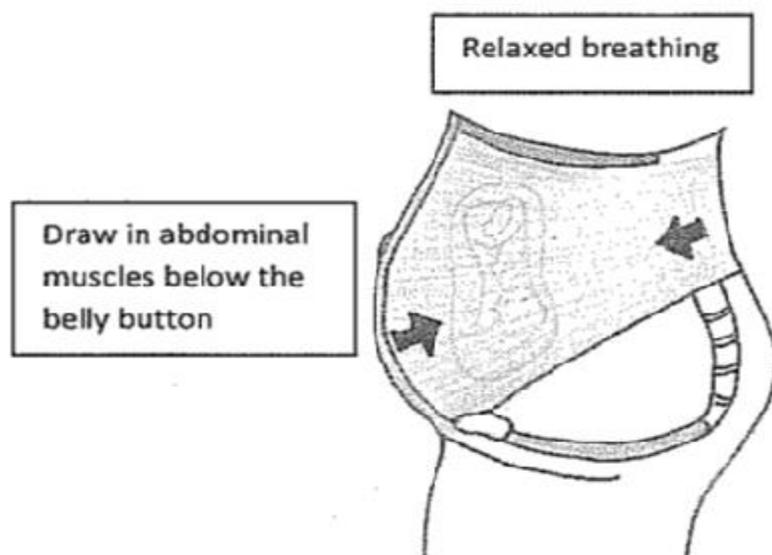
1. Gently draw in your muscle for up to 10 seconds, then relax. Repeat 10 times.

You should complete this exercise four to six times a day. It may take two months to notice any benefit and up to six months to see real improvement.

Protect your back:

- Tighten your deep abdominals before lifting, pushing or pulling
- Tighten your deep abdominals when standing still e.g. doing the dishes

### Transversus abdominus muscle exercises



### Further resources

Whittington Health Website

<https://www.whittington.nhs.uk/>

- Patient Leaflets: Patients and Visitors, About Patients and Visitors, Patient Leaflets For fact sheets including 'Pelvic girdle pain (PGP) and low back (lumbar) pain in Pregnancy' and 'Understanding Pelvic Floor Exercises for Women'
- Self-referral form to Musculoskeletal Physiotherapy: Our Services, Musculoskeletal Services, How to Refer



### Antenatal classes with Physiotherapy advice

To book, call the Antenatal Clinic: 020 7288 5586

- Earlybird – Physiotherapy, Dietician and Midwife
- Parentcraft classes

### Physiotherapy classes by referral only

- Antenatal pelvic and back pain class
- Women's health class for continence or gynaecological problems

### Pelvic, Obstetric and Gynaecological Physiotherapy

<https://pogp.csp.org.uk/>

- Patient Leaflets: Resources, Booklets

For leaflets including 'Fit for Pregnancy', 'Pregnancy-related Pelvic Girdle Pain' and 'Fit for Birth'

### Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG)

<https://www.rcog.org.uk>

- Patients, Patient information leaflets

For leaflets including 'Physical activity and pregnancy'

### Patient advice and liaison service (PALS)

If you have a compliment, complaint or concern please contact our PALS team on 020 7288 5551 or [whh-tr.whitthealthPALS@nhs.net](mailto:whh-tr.whitthealthPALS@nhs.net)

If you need a large print, audio or translated copy of this leaflet please contact us on 020 7288 3182. We will try our best to meet your needs.

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