

Moves for mums-to-be

The right exercise can make you look
and feel your best

By Bernadette Abraham | Gulf News Report

Attitudes towards exercise during pregnancy have changed dramatically over the years. The stereotype of pregnancy being a time of weakness that necessitates near inactivity has long been discarded. Conversely, many questions and concerns remain for most expectant women regarding the specific "dos and don'ts" of exercise during pregnancy. Which exercises are safe? Which to avoid? What are the benefits? Are there special dietary needs? And should every pregnant woman exercise?

As a certified fitness professional and third-time expectant mother, I strongly advocate regular physical activity. Not only does maternal exercise benefit mum-to-be, but it positively impacts the growth of the unborn baby as well.

So if you're looking to get healthy and fit this pregnancy, follow these guidelines and reap the many benefits that exercise has to offer!

Remember to obtain consent from your doctor prior to any new activities to ensure a safe and healthy pregnancy.

Are the exercise benefits really significant?

During the first trimester of pregnancy, it is often difficult to find the energy to get out of bed, let alone exercise. However, going for a walk or performing some kind of physical activity with the little energy I had always made me feel better afterwards. And the reasons are purely chemical! An exercise-induced heart rate elevation causes the release of endorphins; hormones that enhance your sense of wellbeing. Not only does exercise help ward off nausea, fatigue and mood swings, it also helps reduce many of the common pre-natal discomforts felt in the later trimesters like back pain, swelling, leg cramps, varicose veins, constipation and insomnia.

A recent study also showed that women who continued to exercise throughout pregnancy had an active labour that was 30 per cent shorter than non-exercising women, and experienced less problematic deliveries. In fact, there was a 75 per cent decrease in the need for forceps or C-section, a 75 per cent decrease in maternal exhaustion, a 50 per cent decrease in the need for the inducing drug oxytocin, and a 50 per cent decrease in the need to intervene due to foetal heart-rate abnormalities.

Exercising women also experience fewer incidences of postpartum depression and return to activities of normal daily life 40 per cent faster than less-active women. Now who doesn't want that?

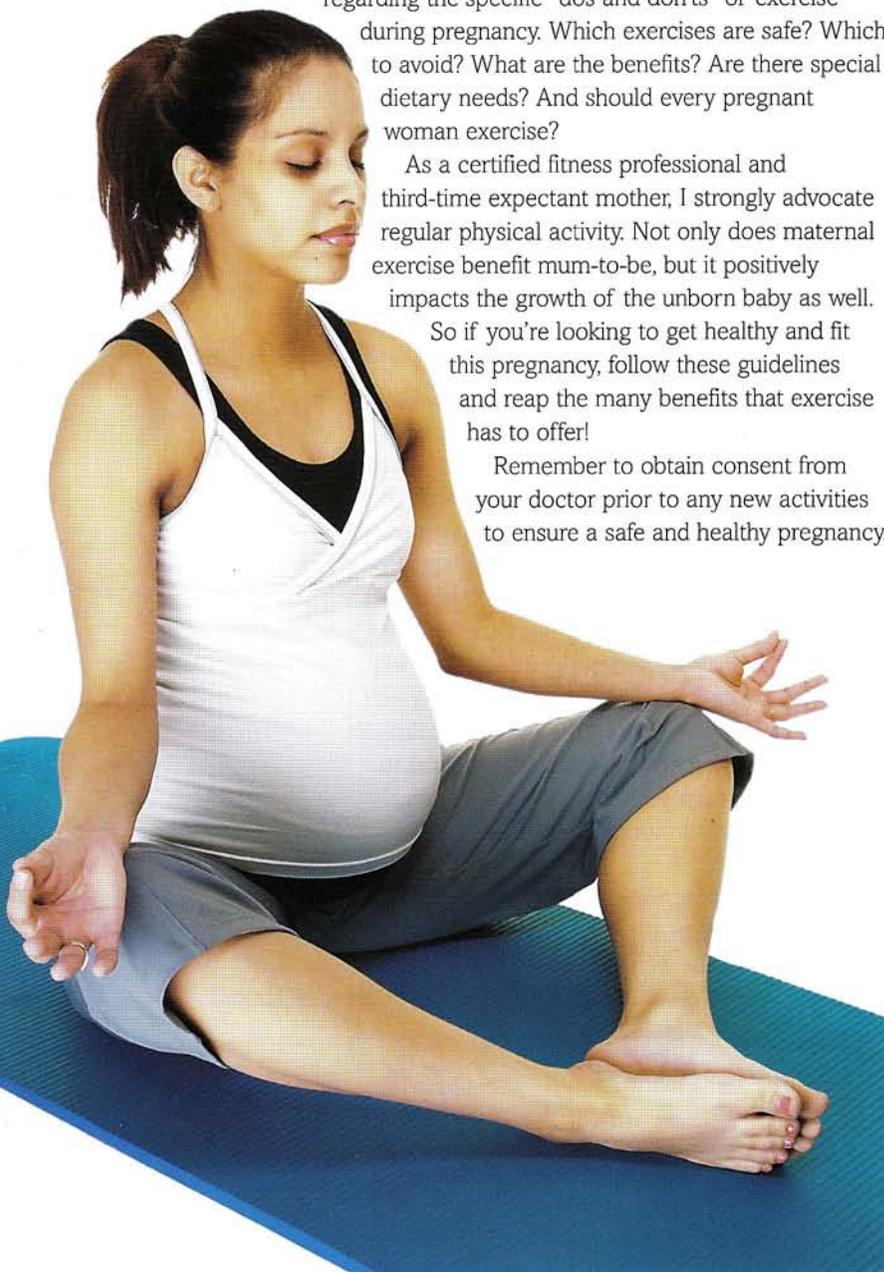
What happens to the pregnant body?

It is important to understand the effects of exercise during pregnancy since the demands of pregnancy alone affect almost every physiological system in a woman's body to support foetal growth and development.

Blood volume expands by 40 to 50 per cent. This helps exchange respiratory gases and nutrients between the mother and foetus. Secondly, it reduces the impact of maternal blood loss at delivery. Also, it improves heat loss during exercise.

Weight-bearing activities increase oxygen demands, which decrease maximal work capacity by 20 to 25 per cent by the second or third trimester. That means exercise intensity levels should decrease as the pregnancy advances.

Exercise-induced heart rate increases early in pregnancy and then gradually falls throughout the



STRESS BUSTERS: Meditative and mind-body classes such as pre-natal yoga and pre-natal Pilates are great choices that can ease the stress of pregnancy and increase flexibility

EXERCISE RECOMMENDATIONS

Duration and Frequency

In the absence of either medical or obstetric complications, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists encourages pregnant women to perform 30 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise on most, preferably every day of the week.

Intensity

It is encouraged to exercise at a level that feels comfortable and does not exhaust the body hours after working out. Listen to your body and stop if you feel any pain or discomfort. Reduce the intensity level as your pregnancy progresses by reducing either the duration, number of repetitions, amount of weight used, and/or by increasing the rest intervals between sets.

Prescription

Swimming, aqua aerobics, low-impact floor aerobics, and brisk walking are all good



Pictures: Shutterstock

cardiovascular options. Meditative and mind-body classes like pre-natal yoga and pre-natal Pilates are also great choices that can ease the stress of pregnancy as well as increase flexibility.

Resistance training can be performed on alternate days using light dumbbells, machines, resistance bands, and medicine balls.

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later trimesters. Therefore, exercise at a level that is comfortable without reaching the point of exhaustion.

Fat and protein metabolism increase and are heavily relied on for maternal energy supplies. Carbohydrate metabolism is spared for the growing foetus, which makes the pregnant woman prone to hypoglycemia (low blood sugar). Exercise helps the body burn fat for fuel, sparing carbohydrate sources, and helps maintain stable blood sugar levels.

Posture is altered, as a result of the added weight and hormones, relaxin and progesterone. The vertebral column's normal "S" curve is exaggerated and joints loosen, resulting in rounded shoulders, a forward head, and deeper lower back curve.

These postural changes often create muscular imbalances that can lead to pain and discomfort, making it important to first stretch the overactive muscles of the shoulders, chest, lower back, hip flexors, hamstrings, and calves, and then strengthen the weakened muscles of the upper back, buttocks, abdominals, pelvic floor, and quadriceps. These exercises can help alleviate many of these discomforts and help make everyday movements more comfortable as the pregnancy progresses.

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Eat right

- Eat a healthy pre-exercise snack of protein and carbohydrates to keep energy levels high
- Eat smaller, more frequent meals throughout the day
- Consume an additional 300 calories per day; exercise adds another 150-250 calories per day
- Drink plenty of water; 180 to 240ml) 15-20 minutes of exercise
- Avoid dieting; aim for healthy weight gain

Exercise no-no's

- Avoid exercising on your back after the first trimester
- Avoid exercising to the point of exhaustion
- Avoid any activity that has potential to cause abdominal trauma or exercises involving a high degree of balance or agility (e.g., rock climbing)

Warning signs to stop exercising

- Vaginal bleeding or preterm labour
- Severe headache
- Chest pains
- Amniotic leakage
- Decreased foetal movement
- Dizziness
- Calf pain, swelling or muscle weakness

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