

When you think of fitness, do you think of someone pumping iron at the gym or running for miles without stopping? If so, it's very unlikely that you'll go anywhere near your track shoes when you're carrying 15 to 30 pounds of extra weight in your womb.

Well, the truth is when done properly and with the necessarily precautions, exercise is safe for pregnant women too because contrary to popular belief, a good fitness routine doesn't need to be rigorous or strenuous at all.

The word 'fitness' really carries a more holistic meaning, encompassing both the body and the mind. And to that end, exercise programmes should be tailored to not only prepare the body for the routine but also to avoid injury and promote an overall sense of well-being.

Studies have shown that exercising elevates mood, improves circulation, lowers blood pressure, enhances immune function and reduces stress levels. Managing stress also has a positive impact on your health and the health of your baby. Moreover, a good sound exercise regime will definitely diminish antenatal and post pregnancy discomforts that may potentially arise.

A good support system


During pregnancy, your hormones relax. This increases the flexibility of ligaments throughout the body and reduces the strength of their support.

Hence, one of the most important supports for your growing 'burden' during this period is the pelvic girdle. This is held up by the sacroiliac joints (located at the bottom of the back on either side of the spine). A proper core stability exercise will improve the strength of muscles required for sacroiliac joint stability, reduce lower back discomfort and help to support the increasing weight of your unborn baby.

Getting started

Before you start on any exercise programme, you should consult your obstetrician to ensure that they are safe for you. A general guideline would be to aim for an exercise at an intermediate level of intensity (approximately 60 per cent of the intensity level of your usual workouts).

Of course, don't do this on an empty stomach. Treat yourself to a light snack



In perfect shape

Mothers-to-be can stay toned with a well-tailored fitness programme

Pregnancy complaints of backache and lower abdominal strain are common but are usually preventable if one chooses to make exercise and fitness a priority.

at least one hour before your workout. This will prevent the excessive lowering of your blood sugar during exercise. Also be sure to drink plenty of non-caffeinated fluids before, during and after an activity.

Warm-ups are important as they help to prevent injuries. So before you start, always spend five minutes warming up. Avoid motions that are bouncy, jerky or high-impact in nature. Instead, try to fit 20 minutes of moderate walking, swimming or cycling into your daily workout schedule as these will help strengthen and stretch those muscles that have been affected during pregnancy.

How to work up a sweat

Here are some simple exercises to start you off.

● **BASIC BREATHING EXERCISES** Sit comfortably on a chair or on a fitness ball. Practise inhaling and exhaling in your seated position. As you exhale, bring your belly button inwards towards you. Then, relax your abdominal as you inhale. If you have difficulty doing this, imagine that you're trying to squeeze into very tight pants. Such visualisation may help.

You should still be able to breathe comfortably and normally without holding your breath. Ensure that your chest remains at its normal size as you exhale, and relax your upper body as you pull in your lower abdominal. Repeat this exercise 20 times in two sets. Rest for at least two minutes after the first set before moving on to the next set.

● **MORE CHALLENGING EXERCISES** That wasn't too hard was it? Want to challenge yourself further? Then try the following exercises:

1 Rest your back against the fitness ball or the wall. Keep your knees bent between 45° and 90° to add resistance to your quadriceps muscles. Repeat the abdominal contractions 20 times while keeping your knee bent and the ball behind your back. Aim for a total of two sets and allow a two-minute rest interval between sets. Remember to give your quadriceps muscles a few stretches to release tensions on the thighs after the routine.

2 Sit on the fitness ball or chair. Raise both of your arms horizontally to your side at shoulder level. Exhale as you turn to the right. Inhale as you return to the centre. Exhale again as you turn to the left and inhale as you return

to the centre. Perform two sets of 20 repetitions (10 times on each side of the body). This targets mainly the oblique muscles of the torso.

3 Sit on the fitness ball or a chair. Again raise both arms horizontally at shoulder level. Raise your right leg and exhale. Keep your left leg resting on the floor. Perform a right turn with your torso. Take care to maintain your balance. This will greatly test your stability and strength. Now inhale as you lower your leg to the floor and turn back to the centre. Do likewise for the left side. Perform this exercise in two sets of 20 repetitions each. (CAUTION: Have someone by your side while you exercise on the fitness ball to prevent you from falling.)

● EXERCISING PELVIC FLOOR MUSCLES

Another set of exercise you should perform is the Kegel exercises. These exercises are important because they will help to strengthen and tone the pelvic floor muscles which are important during delivery. These exercises also prevent urinary inconveniences and increase satisfaction during sex.

You can perform this exercise lying on your side, four-point kneeling, sitting, squatting with arms supported, in a lunge position or standing with legs apart. Start the exercise by adopting any of the positions described.

The pelvic floor muscles are located between the thighs. To perform this exercise, you need to exhale while tightening the muscles around your vaginal opening. To do this, imagine drawing something up from the ground to your stomach between your thighs. Keeping your upper body in a relaxed position. Inhale and exhale for two sets of 20 counts each. You are advised to do the Kegel exercises daily.

Pregnancy complaints of backache and lower abdominal strain are common but are usually preventable if one chooses to make exercise and fitness a priority.

The pelvic and the lumbar spines will definitely be subjected to more stress during the later stages of pregnancy so ensure that you do targeted exercises to reduce this discomfort. Happy working out! ♥

This article is contributed by Dr Ann Tan, consultant obstetrician & gynaecologist at the Women & Fetal Centre (a member of Pacific Healthcare) and David Wee, a fitness instructor at Fitness First.