

## Exercise and Activity in Pregnancy

During your pregnancy regular exercise is very beneficial. Find a form of exercise that is enjoyable. If you don't enjoy it, it may be because it is uncomfortable and putting stress on your body. Forcing yourself because it is "good for you" goes against taking care of and nurturing yourself during your pregnancy. Exercise should not cause stress or strain. Listen to your body.

Find a form of exercise that:

- you like to do
- increases your feelings of well being
- exercises the specific muscles that you use during pregnancy, labour and birth.

You don't have to go to classes, join a gym or develop a specific routine although some women find group exercise supportive. You can exercise naturally by integrating more movement into your daily life. Walk more frequently, do gentle stretching exercises or yoga while at home; bending, squatting exercises while doing housework or gardening. Regular walking is very healthy for you and your baby.

The basic rule of thumb is: If you have not been exercising regularly do not embark on a regimen of strenuous routines when becoming pregnant. Easy does it. Research shows that exercise is good for you, but it doesn't show that bouts of strenuous exercise are better than regular moderate exercise.

When you become pregnant your body goes through many hormonal changes that may affect the type of exercise you choose. One of the hormones that is released in your body is **relaxin**. This hormone relaxes your ligaments, cartilage and muscles and enables them to stretch and move more easily. This also facilitates the movement of the pelvis allowing for the growth of your baby and the process of labour and birth. Because your muscles are in a more relaxed state you may need to modify your exercise as your pregnancy advances.

Because of the hormonal changes the symphysis pubis joint (your pubic bone) may become uncomfortable or even painful with certain movements as your pregnancy progresses. If this happens you will need to be aware that some activities or movements such as climbing stairs, getting in and out of cars or even getting in and out of bed may aggravate this condition. Please talk to your midwife. There are ways to move, for example, keeping your knees together and moving your legs as one unit when getting out of the car or bed that will minimize the discomfort. A pregnancy support belt may be very helpful.

Lower back pain is often present in pregnancy. Changes in posture and the furniture you are sitting on may need to be evaluated.

Some alternative therapies such as chiropractic, massage, physiotherapy or shiatsu massage are safe to be used in pregnancy and can be very helpful.

Some forms of exercise that may be enjoyable are: walking, yoga, swimming, aquacize, gentle stretching, tai chi chuan, and dancing.

## Rest and Relaxation....

During pregnancy it is very important for you and your baby to get enough rest. If you get overtired, both of you will be under stress. The amount of rest you need each day, will vary. Activity level, diet, stress, weather and hormonal changes affect your activity level. During pregnancy your body uses a lot more energy even when resting. At times you may find yourself feeling exhausted and weary. Sometimes people think food equals energy, and reason that when they are low on energy they should eat. Getting enough rest helps to avoid overeating. The important thing is to avoid becoming overtired. Taking little (or big!) naps when you feel fatigued can be extremely helpful. If you can, take afternoon naps in the last two weeks, you never know when you may be up labouring at night!

## Sleeping positions during Pregnancy

### In what position should I sleep while I am pregnant?

There are no reliable scientific studies showing that pregnant women sleeping on their (left) side have healthier pregnancies than those sleeping on their backs. During pregnancy you should feel free to sleep in whatever position is comfortable. Women have been doing this for thousands of years and having healthy babies.

**But I have heard, and many pregnancy sites on the internet state that sleeping on your side is best while you're pregnant. Is this true?**

Let's look at the myths and the facts of this.

**The myth:** *Sleeping on your back can hurt the baby.*

Imagine awakening to find yourself on your back and believing that you have caused some harm to your unborn baby. Many women believe that blood flow through the placenta will be reduced if they lie on their backs. The origin of this myth can be found in some valid research originally performed in the 1960s and 1970s, which demonstrated **that blood flow can be compromised when a mother is forced to labor lying flat on her back for long periods.** Compression of the vena cava, a major vessel underlying the uterus, may occur in

this position **when the mother is in labor**. This is why women in labour are encouraged to change position often: to be on their sides, sitting on the birth ball or walking when they are in labor. Contractions reduce blood flow to the baby for a certain portion of the peak of the contraction. A healthy term baby can tolerate this stress without difficulty.

**The facts:** *For normal, healthy pregnant women, any sleep position is safe for the baby.*

During the later stages of pregnancy, the uterus and baby **may** be large enough to press on the large vein, the inferior vena cava, and reduce flow of blood from the lower body (and uterus) back to the heart. But this tends to matter **only in certain circumstances** such as prolonged labor, if blood pressure is high, if the kidneys are not functioning properly, with anesthesia, or if there is a problem with fetal development. In those situations, lying on the left side may be somewhat helpful, or in some circumstances the baby may prefer the right side as evidenced by fetal heart rate changes. But for normal, healthy women in the midst of a routine, successful pregnancy, the best position for sleeping is the one that's most comfortable.

And, if blood flow was indeed compromised, the mother would likely feel dizzy, short of breath or very uncomfortable and she would shift to her side naturally before the baby was affected. If women are lying on their backs, one hip needs to be lifted only a couple of inches to make a difference in any venous compression that might be occurring.

### **Find a comfortable position**

Pregnant women generally change position quite frequently during a night's sleep. Most women use lots of pillows to help in finding a comfortable position. It can be helpful to place a soft pillow under the belly or between the knees, or if you like sleeping on your back you may be more comfortable placing a thin pillow (can be wedge-shaped) or a folded towel under one hip, changing sides as necessary during the night.

**Relax and sleep in whatever position you feel comfortable!**