

INFORMATION FOR
PREGNANT WOMEN

FIT for Pregnancy

*Keep healthy and cope with the
physical demands of pregnancy -
exercises and advice to help you*



ASSOCIATION OF CHARTERED PHYSIOTHERAPISTS IN WOMEN'S HEALTH

Fit for Pregnancy

This leaflet is designed to help you understand how to reduce the strain on your body and provide you with information on postures, positions and exercises that when carried out routinely may help to make you more comfortable.

If problems do not ease ask your midwife or doctor to refer you to a specialist physiotherapist.

Finding a specialist physiotherapist

This leaflet has been produced by the Association of Chartered Physiotherapists in Women's Health (ACPWH). For further details see website **www.acpwh.csp.org.uk**

For help finding a specialist physiotherapist please contact:

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Exercise and pregnancy

Mild to moderate exercise is good for you and your developing baby and most healthy women will find a programme of moderate exercise beneficial. Pregnancy can be a good opportunity to improve your level of fitness. Brisk walking and swimming (or aquanatal classes) are excellent.

If you are not used to exercising, you may wish to start with some low impact exercise/ activities such as walking, swimming, static bike, gym ball, core stability exercises or chair based exercises with small hand weights and/or therabands. Begin with 15 minutes continuous activity, gradually increasing to 30 minutes 4 times per week, then daily (see ACPWH leaflet 'Fit and Safe' page 11). As your pregnancy progresses continue with familiar activities and remember that it is natural to slow down. Any activity which produces significant pain should be avoided.

Exercising tips:

- drink plenty of water to avoid dehydration
- work within your own limits to avoid getting too hot or breathless
- listen to your body – **stop** if you are uncomfortable, tired or feeling unwell
- if you were running regularly before you became pregnant, it is safe to continue during pregnancy possibly at a lower intensity but might get uncomfortable as you get larger
- be cautious in the gym – ask for help on which machines to use and how to use them correctly
- competitive / contact and new sports may be risky, and should be avoided

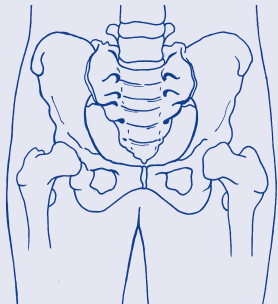
- hot/ humid/high altitude and low depth conditions are generally not suitable for pregnant women
- rapid twists and turns and changes of direction may cause pain – take care
- long periods of lying on your back over 16 weeks pregnant are to be avoided

Stop any activity that produces pain, especially in the back or pelvis.

If possible attend a specific pregnancy exercise class instructed by a qualified, specialist instructor, which should include work on posture, stabilisation for the spine and pelvis and functional techniques in standing.

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 resultant increase in movement could lead to aches and pains in the back and pelvis. As a result of the increasing weight of your baby and a change in your centre of gravity, your posture may 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 routine 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

- to correctly get in and out of a car: sit first then bring your legs in to the car. To get out: place both feet out of the car and using your arms to help push yourself into standing



- use correct technique for lifting and avoid heavy loads

- trying to spend time

lying on either side which will help spread the load. Try to 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 girdle pain, seek medical advice or a referral to a specialist physiotherapist. Your GP or midwife should be able to arrange this (see ACPWH leaflet 'Pregnancy-Related Pelvic Girdle Pain' page 11).

Abdominals

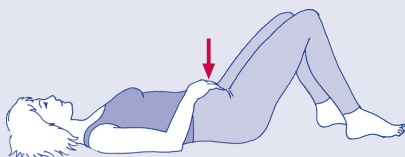
Your tummy muscles will stretch naturally as your baby grows. As they stretch they may weaken. It is important to use these muscles correctly to maintain their strength, to provide support for your back and your baby, and to encourage good posture.

Your body has its own deep abdominal support muscles which act like a corset to support your growing baby.

How to do the abdominal hollowing (core) exercise

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 muscles. Your tummy should lift away from your hand, and towards your lower back. Now relax.

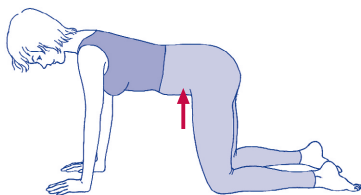
Repeat several times.

To progress, start as above, and keep your tummy muscles **drawn in** while you keep breathing normally, to a count of four.

Feel the muscle working under your hand, supporting your baby, and then relax. As you get stronger, try to build up how long you can hold the drawn in position ideally up to 10 seconds. Eventually aim for 10 repetitions of 10 second holds. Do this exercise in different

positions – lying on your side, on all fours, sitting and standing.

This is the muscle to use for support when you are being active e.g. vacuuming, shopping, bending up and down.



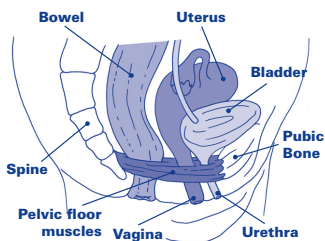
Pelvic floor muscles

This is the name given to the muscles which lie at the base of your pelvis forming a 'floor'.

They are important for:

- the control your bladder and bowel
- sexual function and pleasure
- the stability of the pelvic and lumbar joints
- the support of your pelvic organs helping to prevent prolapse
- the support of your growing baby

The increasing weight of your baby during pregnancy, followed by the delivery, may weaken your pelvic floor muscles. If this support is reduced you may leak urine when you exert yourself, especially after your



baby is born. To try to prevent this you should exercise your pelvic floor muscles every day.

How to find your pelvic floor muscles

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 the back and front passages upwards and forwards.

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

How to check that you are contracting the pelvic floor muscles correctly:

- Use a small mirror to look at the area between your legs (perineum). When you contract the muscles, the skin between the vagina and the anus should move upwards and inwards away from the mirror. Stop if you see bulging. This is not correct, and you should seek help from a specialist physiotherapist.
- Hook your thumb or finger firmly into the side wall of your vagina. You should feel the pelvic floor muscles tighten against your finger/thumb.

You may find that your abdominal 'support' muscle is working at the same time as your pelvic floor muscles. ***Try to practise these exercises several times a day.***

For maximum support and protection when you are being active during the day, try to draw up the pelvic floor muscles a little way, keeping them active too.

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. ***Try to practise these exercises several times a day.***

Both these pelvic floor muscle exercises can be practised anywhere, any time and in any position. It helps to link them with everyday activities. Eventually try doing the exercises when boiling the kettle, in meetings, waiting for the bus, or watching TV. Do not exercise your pelvic floor muscles while emptying your bladder.

Constipation may cause you to strain on the toilet which adds pressure and unwanted stretch to your pelvic floor muscles. Try to drink enough fluids to help prevent this.

Practise pelvic floor muscle 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 may cause 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 (see ACPWH leaflet 'Mitchell Method of Simple Relaxation' page 11).

Minor problems

Leg cramps

These are due to changes in body chemistry and changing pressures in the abdomen.

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

Some women find that it helps to exercise their feet before going to bed:

- Ankle circles 10 times each way briskly
- Calf stretches – leaning against a wall. Alternatively in sitting – with your legs out straight, pull your toes up to stretch the calf, hold for a few moments then release
- Massaging the calf muscles

If this advice does not help, your doctor may be able to give you some medication, so do ask.

Swollen ankles and varicose veins

From about four months of pregnancy it is more comfortable for you and your baby if you can avoid lying flat on your back. Try to rest lying on your side with your legs slightly bent. Briskly move your feet up and down for at least thirty seconds at a time, every hour or so. 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, seek medical advice immediately.

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 hormonal changes in pregnancy may lead to emotional ups and downs and sometimes forgetfulness. After the birth these problems usually disappear gradually (see ACPWH leaflet 'Fit for Birth'). Help is available from your midwife, or GP, if you are worried about coping with these emotional changes.

ACPWH Leaflets

- Fit for Birth
- Fit and Safe
- Pregnancy-related Pelvic Girdle Pain (for mothers-to-be and new mothers)
- The Mitchell Method of Simple Relaxation
- Fit for the Future

For details of these and other useful reading, such as the guidance on minor ailments during pregnancy, see website

www.acpwh.csp.org.uk

