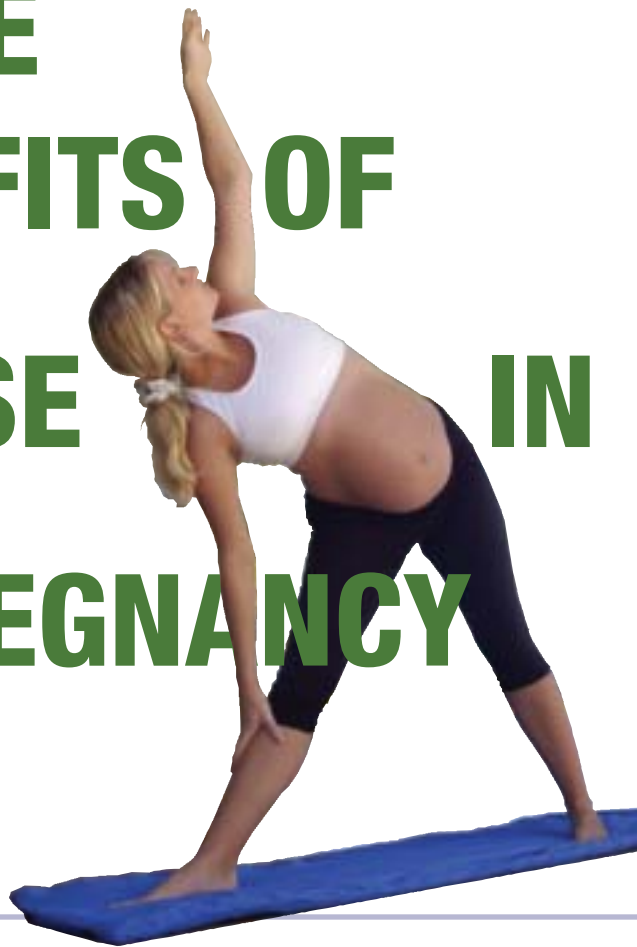


THE BENEFITS OF EXERCISE IN PREGNANCY

Pamela Wadsworth



ABSTRACT

Many pregnant women do not exercise. Exercise in pregnancy is correlated with a decrease in many common problems of pregnancy. In addition, establishing the habit of exercise in pregnancy may decrease the later life incidences of chronic hypertension and type 2 diabetes in women who are predisposed to these illnesses. Exercise during pregnancy is beneficial to fetuses as well. In most cases, there appears to be no harm to the fetus with moderate exercise. Although recommendations are currently accepted for pregnant women to engage in moderate exercise, many women may not receive this information from their health care providers. Prenatal care offers a unique opportunity to assist in the adoption of healthy behaviors.

Keywords: benefits, clinicians, exercise, hints, pregnancy

As nurse practitioners, we focus on providing holistic care for our patients, emphasizing prevention, treatment, and education. Although our role in prevention is important, it can also be frustrating. It can be difficult to encourage our patients to adopt healthy behaviors such as exercise. This can be especially difficult during pregnancy, when women face unique physiologic barriers, such as fatigue, nausea, and increased body size. However, this could be an important time to emphasize the importance of activity and exercise. Pregnancy may be one of the only periods in a woman's life when she has such frequent contact with the health care system. She may be more willing to adopt healthy lifestyle habits to benefit herself and her growing baby. Research shows that exercise during pregnancy improves the short-term health outcomes of the woman and her fetus, such as decreasing the chance of developing preeclampsia,^{1,2} operative delivery,³ and gestational diabetes⁴; improving mood⁵; and reducing pregnancy discomforts.⁶⁻⁹ It may also have a role in preventing chronic diseases such as type 2 diabetes^{10,11} and hypertension^{12,13} (Table 1). Despite the many benefits of exercise in pregnancy, many women and their families may mistakenly believe that exercise during pregnancy may be harmful.¹⁴

Table 1. Benefits of Exercise and Activity During Pregnancy

Decreased chance of preeclampsia, second leading cause of maternal death
Decreased chance of operative delivery
Decreased chance of developing gestational diabetes
Improved mood
Reduction of pregnancy discomforts—backache and lower extremity edema
Possible prevention of type 2 diabetes
Possible prevention of chronic hypertension

This article describes how mothers and babies benefit from exercise and the current recommendations and methods to encourage pregnant women to be more physically active.

Moderate exercise is defined as activity for 30 or more minutes a day, 5 or more days a week. Examples of moderate activities are brisk walking, bicycling, vacuuming, gardening, or any activity that causes small increases in breathing or heart rate.¹⁵ Another criteria for moderate walking is starting to sweat within 5 to 10 minutes after beginning exercise but being able to carry on a conversation without being out of breath.¹⁶ The advantage of these definitions is that they allow women to count many of the everyday chores they do toward exercise. It also assists them to be more cognizant of ways to accumulate exercise throughout the day, such as taking the stairs instead of the elevator.

RESEARCH SUGGESTS SOME BENEFITS OF EXERCISE IN PREGNANCY

Exercise is associated with a lower incidence and severity of two serious conditions associated with pregnancy: preeclampsia and gestational diabetes. Preeclampsia is a hypertensive disorder of pregnancy, characterized by maternal high blood pressure, proteinuria, and edema.¹⁷ Preeclampsia, as well as other hypertensive disorders of pregnancy, is the second leading cause of maternal death in the United States.¹⁷ Women who engage in regular leisure activities or moderate exercise had a 33% to 35% reduction in the incidence of preeclampsia.^{1,2} Preventing preeclampsia is obviously beneficial to mother and baby in the short term but may also be beneficial in the long term. Women with preeclampsia have an increased risk of developing hypertension and associated cerebral vascular accidents.^{11,13} Exercise may function to prevent many forms of hyperten-

sion in women during and after pregnancy. Forty percent of women with gestational diabetes will develop type 2 diabetes within 4 years.¹⁸ Moderate exercise decreases the risk of developing type 2 diabetes.^{10,11} By encouraging pregnant women to exercise, practitioners may help women and their families avoid the physical, social, and emotional stressors that accompany hypertensive disorders and diabetes.

Research has shown a reduction in the incidence of gestational diabetes in active pregnant women. Being active during pregnancy was associated with a 48% reduction in the diagnosis of gestational diabetes.⁴ When these women were active before and during pregnancy, a 60% reduction in the incidence of gestational diabetes was seen.⁴ Exercise continues to have a critical role once gestational diabetes is diagnosed. A study that compared the efficacy of traditional insulin therapy with exercise sessions three times a week in controlling serum glucose levels found no differences in the level of glycemic control between the two groups.¹⁹ In addition, the women in the exercise group had a compliance rate of greater than 90%.¹⁹

Moderate exercise may help reduce the risks that result from a cesarean delivery such as uterine infection, surgical wound complications, cardiopulmonary and thromboembolic conditions, longer hospital stays, and higher readmission rates.²⁰ A study of pregnant nulliparous women showed that the sedentary women who participated had a greater odds ratio (4.48) of having a cesarean delivery than subjects who exercised.³

Exercise during pregnancy is associated with less depression and anxiety and with higher feelings of self-esteem. Pregnant women who exercised during pregnancy cited improvement of mood as the most important benefit to exercise.²¹

Moderate exercise has a role in decreasing lower back pain and lower extremity edema, which are common discomforts during pregnancy. About half of pregnant women have back pain.⁶ This back pain can be so debilitating that some women must take sick leave from work.⁶ A small pilot study comparing rate and severity of lower back pain in pregnant women who were sedentary with pregnant women who participated in supervised weekly 1-hour exercise classes found a significant reduction in the report of back pain severe enough to force them to take sick leave compared with the sedentary group.⁶ Another group of researchers found that a 12-week exercise program during the second half of pregnancy significantly reduced back pain.⁷ Water exercise helps to

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