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Original Research Article

Types of physical activity during pregnancy



Marta Makara-Studzińska^{a,*}, Karolina Kryś-Noszczyk^a,
Małgorzata Starczyńska^b, Aleksander Sieroń^c, Zbigniew Śliwiński^b

^aIndependent Laboratory of Mental Health, Medical University of Lublin, Poland^bThe Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce, Poland^cMedical University in Katowice, Poland

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: In normal pregnancy, there is no need for women to give up their current life activities. Every woman should take care of her organism through being active and maintaining physical and mental health, good posture and keeping proper body weight. There is no doubt that individually tailored physical activity during pregnancy is essential. **Aim:** The aim of this study was to investigate the selected forms of physical activity undertaken during pregnancy and to compare the level of physical activity before pregnancy and during its duration.

Materials and methods: The survey questionnaire method was used and a literature review was performed as well. The research tool was designed for the purpose of this study and it was designed by the author of this research. The study was conducted among 100 pregnant women living in the Lublin Province. The data collected during the survey were subjected to statistical analysis.

Results and discussion: We have observed that the level of physical activity during pregnancy increased in the study group. Before pregnancy, most women chose walking (29%) as a preferred form of physical activity or aerobics (18%). Some subjects practiced several times a week (36%), and some respondents did not practice any physical activity at all (27%). During pregnancy, most women attempted to improve their physical activity, usually by means of walking (43%) or attending antenatal classes (20%). In total, 37% of the respondents exercised once a week, and 28% of the studied women even several times a week.

Conclusions: Physical activity during pregnancy is very popular among women in the Lublin area. According to studies by various authors physical activity carries many benefits for both mother and baby, so pregnant women should be encouraged to perform physical exercises if there are no contraindications.

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*Correspondence to: Independent Laboratory of Mental Health, Medical University of Lublin, ul. Chodzki 15, 20-093 Lublin, Poland. Tel./fax: +48 81 718 6592.

E-mail addresses: mmakara@go2.pl (M. Makara-Studzińska), zdrowie.psychiczne@umlub.pl (K. Kryś-Noszczyk), starm@ujk.edu.pl (M. Starczyńska), asieron2@wp.pl (A. Sieroń), dr_sliwinski@post.pl (Z. Śliwiński).

1. Introduction

During pregnancy it is important to take care of one's organism and one's physical condition relatively early. Exercises performed regularly by future mothers can help them in reducing or completely eliminating discomforts associated with pregnancy. Additionally, physical activity has a positive impact on child development, parturition, return to the pre-pregnancy figure, and prevention of chronic diseases such as diabetes.^{14,24} The effect of physical activity on a pregnant woman has been the subject of many studies. These studies show that moderate physical exercises performed during pregnancy have a surprisingly positive effect on the course of pregnancy and do not cause additional health problems.¹⁰ Despite these benefits, few women know how to maintain their physical fitness during this period.⁶

Thanks to being physically active, women tolerate physical exertion during pregnancy better. This also refers to exertion during labor itself. An improvement in metabolism causes less weight gain and results in a lower prevalence of obesity, stretch marks and varicose veins. Physical exercises can have a positive impact on the psyche of women,³ reduce the fear of childbirth and often contribute to their decision to resign from pharmacological analgesia.¹⁵ Research conducted in the 2011–2012 period at the University of Valle indicates a particularly beneficial effect of physical activity during pregnancy in the reduction of perinatal depression.¹⁶

Statistics show that women who exercised regularly before becoming pregnant and throughout the pregnancy have shorter individual stages of labor; dilation of the cervix progresses much faster in them; and they feel less painful uterine cramping. Postpartum hospital stay of these patients is shorter, maternal mortality rate is three times lower than in the general population of women, and symptoms of diabetes are less frequent.^{2,5,21}

The positive impact of physical activity during pregnancy is also noticeable during the puerperium. Women quickly regain physical and mental balance. In addition, as a result of a better blood supply to breasts lactation begins earlier, while lasting longer. Research has confirmed that active women are less likely to suffer from exhaustion during childbirth and they have a reduced likelihood of artificial induction of labor, episiotomy, the appearance of abnormal heart rhythm, and child labor interventions such as forceps or cesarean section.¹⁸

There is no uniform solution for pregnant women as regards choosing forms of exercise and physical activity. Everything depends on the course of pregnancy, its advancement and the health status of the mother. The overriding principle pertaining to all cases is to consult with the physician that one intends to start practicing exercises. In case of high-risk pregnancy an increased physical activity should not be undertaken.²²

During the first trimester of normal pregnancy it is recommended to begin breathing exercises, relaxation, exercises of postural and pelvic floor muscles and to continue these activities during the entire pregnancy.⁹

In the second trimester, it is recommended to perform exercises in a stable position. It is important that as of the beginning of the fifth month of pregnancy the supine position

is not used because of the pressure of the uterus on the vena cava.^{9,22}

It is claimed that the greatest benefits of exercise for women are brought about in the third trimester of pregnancy. It is connected directly with the course of delivery. Women who are physically active develop a smaller increase of body fat and return to health after birth faster. In reality, however, in this period women get tired faster and are not sufficiently strong enough to exercise intensively. It is particularly important at this time that women undertake such physical activity as their body best tolerates.⁹

During pregnancy, the following exercise types are mainly practiced:

1. Breathing exercises and how to breathe during labor.²⁰
2. General body shaping exercises.^{12,22}
3. Relaxation exercises.^{3,6}
4. Posture shaping exercises.¹²
5. Exercises to improve elasticity and the perineal muscles of the pelvic floor – Kegel exercises.^{6,11}
6. Mock contractions learning.²²

Irrespective of the kind of sport a pregnant woman practices, her training should be adapted to the pregnancy course, her well-being, the fetus development and whether she is gaining weight appropriately.¹

Exercises in the pool are very popular among pregnant women. The ability to swim is not required to be able to practice. Non-swimmers can use the accessories that will enhance the sensation of security, such as boards, noodles or other flotation devices. The main objective of water exercises during pregnancy is to obtain relief, thereby reducing pressure on the motion of the joint surfaces and pain during movement, as well as gaining peace of mind.^{1,13}

Walking is the most natural and safe form of physical activity available to everyone. Though often underestimated, a walk in fresh air has a very positive impact on pregnant women. Even those women who were rarely active before can begin regular walks during pregnancy as long as there are no medical contraindications for this type of activity. An increasingly popular form of walking is Nordic Walking. This technique has been recommended for pregnant women; it is a combination of walking (race walking) with the technique of cross-country skiing – the repulsion from the substrate. The use of poles stabilizes posture and relieves back pressure, whereas any outdoor activity results in a better oxygenation of the organism. Nordic Walking strengthens the muscles of future mothers. Scandinavian-style walking involves as much as 90% of our muscles, and walking with poles can be practiced throughout the year, irrespective of weather conditions.

Kinesiotherapy and any other exercises are recommended only in normal pregnancy. Any pathology that occurs during pregnancy and any health hazard for a pregnant woman or the child may temporarily or permanently become a contraindication to exercise. Absolute contraindications to exercise during pregnancy include valvular heart disease, circulatory failure, severe hypertension, thyroid disease, acute fevers, inflammation, chronic appendicitis prone to exacerbations, prolonged shortness of breath, active process of tuberculosis,

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