



## Exercise and Pregnancy

**Question: I am 12 weeks pregnant and starting to show. Some of my friends are advising me to stop riding my bike, even though I feel great and bike-riding is an important activity for me. What activities do you recommend for exercise in pregnancy? What activities do you discourage?**

Your question is important, and ideally, the discussion should be individualized to each pregnant woman.

Your question is also timely - just this week, a prenatal client who happens to be visiting from Denmark, rode up to my office on her bicycle, despite snowy streets and sidewalks, frigid temperatures, and a 30-week belly! She explained that she has biked her whole life, primarily for transportation, as most Danes do, and found it odd that Americans question whether it is safe to bike in normal pregnancy.

I myself bicycled throughout pregnancy and found it an extremely pregnancy-friendly activity. It is easy on the back and pubic bone, it promotes optimal fetal positioning, and it takes the weight off joints while giving your legs and heart a good work-out.. If you bike for transportation, it saves a lot of time over walking..

Precautions to consider for bicycling during pregnancy:

1. If you are only an occasional biker or start biking in pregnancy, you may be less aware of your changing center of gravity as your pregnancy weight increases and shifts. Bike in low-traffic areas at low speed unless or until you are a regular biker.
2. The extra weight of your baby increases the curvature of your lower back. Therefore it is important to have a well-fitting, comfortable bike if you bike more than a few blocks. Many women prefer to be as upright as possible, to allow a relaxed back and neck.
3. As with any exercise in pregnancy, it will take you longer to recover your breath and resting heart rate when you get off your bike. Reestablishing equilibrium after exertion may take 15 minutes.
4. As with any outdoor exercise in pregnancy, be mindful of weather conditions and guard against falls.

Daily exercise of some sort is very important for maintaining every level of well-being during pregnancy. Regular activity lowers your risk for gestational diabetes, high blood pressure, depression, excess stress, insomnia, and susceptibility to flues, colds, and other infections. Flexibility and endurance enhancing activities allow you to tap into the life-power that many women experience in pregnancy, birth, and as new mothers.

By regular activity during pregnancy I mean integrated activities that are part of your regular functions or fun. These include house-cleaning, child care, dog-walking, gardening, walking instead of driving whenever possible, taking stairs instead of elevators, baking bread and chopping vegetables by hand, making snowmen, ice-skating, yoga, bowling, dancing, sex. We don't always think of these activities as exercise, though research on functions of daily living shows excellent cardiac and metabolic response. In some ways such activities are more beneficial than jogging, for example, because they include all-around body movements, balance and body-awareness, are easier on weight-bearing joints, at the same time being more productive!

By flexibility and endurance enhancing activities I mean more sustained, targeted activities such as swimming, walking 20-30 minutes a day, regular yoga or stretching, and light weight training. In these exercises you will find the shortness of breath that is caused by progesterone and a growing uterus especially noticeable. Don't expect to exercise at the same pace as before pregnancy. You may also find that your heart races more easily with exercise. In pregnancy, your heart beats faster to deliver nutrients and oxygen to your baby and to compensate for your increased blood volume.

Water activities reduce swelling and water retention and lend a sense of buoyancy that feels increasingly wonderful as your pregnancy progresses. Local athletic clubs and the YMCA offer water aerobics for pregnancy. Many of my clients express concern about chlorine in pools and other chemicals in lakes. Some clubs use higher levels of chlorine than others. Call your local UW extension for health reports regarding local lakes. These are local challenges that you and I can put before club and county officials and consider in the personal lifestyle choices we make.

Walking outdoors offers cardiac, fresh air, sunlight, bird song, and fetal positioning benefits all at the same time. Whether you walk outdoors or on a treadmill, however, be aware that pregnancy hormones allow your joints to relax and this, combined with the increasing weight of your baby, make posture and body attunement especially important in order to prevent injury and strain. Don't forget those two hidden joints – at your pubis and sacrum - that loosen and relax toward the end of pregnancy to allow more stretching for your baby to be born; they can become sore and even prevent sustained walking. If that is the case, I recommend an abdominal binder and swimming and biking as alternative exercises.

Yoga or stretching is excellent preparation for labor and birth. Feeling comfortable and at home in your body in a variety of positions and feeling relaxed and expansive in your breathing can make labor easier. There are many yoga-for-pregnancy videos and at least two local prenatal yoga classes available.

Light weight-training promotes a sense of upper body strength, the area most of us feel physically weakest in. Lifting 2-5 lb weights once a day for 10 minutes makes a measurable cardiovascular and metabolic difference.

While active, drink lots of high quality water and make sure you're getting the 300 extra calories or more a day that you need in pregnancy. As always, you're the expert in your body and your baby – listen to them! If you experience bleeding, cramping, dizziness, faintness, or pain, stop the activity and call your health care practitioner. If you intuitively feel something isn't right, take a break and pay attention to your baby's movements and any other signals.

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This text was originally published in the Willy Street Co-op Reader in the **Ask the Midwife** column, where Ingrid Andersson of Community Midwives, LLC in Madison, answers questions on pregnancy, childbirth and related topics. More of these articles can be found at Ingrid's website: [www.gentlehomebirth.org](http://www.gentlehomebirth.org)