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BABY, LET'S GET PHYSICAL!

Exercising shouldn't come to a standstill just because you're carrying life inside of you. Staying active throughout your pregnancy is a big plus for both baby and you, so here's the scoop on working out, from when to start to what to avoid.

By Jennifer Ho

You probably feel lethargic most of the time and don't understand why you should be up on your feet, much less break out in a sweat. But did you know that women who exercise in pregnancy tend to have a shorter labour time and fewer delivery complications?

According to Dr Goh Shen Li, Senior Consultant Obstetrician & Gynaecologist of SL Goh Women's Clinic, "many women find that exercise helps them to adjust to the physical changes that occur during pregnancy. It may help relieve tiredness, lower back pain and reduce varicose veins and swelling of the feet and ankles. It also improves muscle tone, strength and endurance, making it easier to carry the weight you gain during pregnancy [as well as] prepare you for the physical challenge of labour."

She also points out that staying fit during pregnancy can improve sleep and promote a sense of well being as it helps to reduce feelings of stress, anxiety and depression.

MAKE THE FIRST STEP

Contrary to popular belief, you can start or continue exercising as long as you feel comfortable doing it and have no early pregnancy complications such as a threatened miscarriage.

The aim is to stay fit rather than to reach peak fitness levels. "Swimming, fast walking, aqua aerobics, dancing, stretching exercises and toning exercises with light weights are safe in pregnancy," suggests Dr Goh.

On the other hand, avoid exercises that involve lying flat on your back (particularly after 16 weeks); where there is a possibility of falling or losing your balance, such as gymnastics and cycling; contact sports like kickboxing, judo or squash; and scuba diving.

As with all exercises, ensure that you do not overexert yourself by doing proper warm-up and cool-down. During the exercise, monitor yourself periodically – you shouldn't become breathless as you talk, and your heart rate should not exceed 150 beats per minute or 130 beats per minute if you were sedentary before pregnancy.

Dr Goh also recommends that pregnant ladies who weren't active prior to their pregnancy to begin with no more than 15 minutes of continuous exercise three times a week, increasingly gradually to a maximum of 30-minute sessions four times a week to daily.

LISTEN TO YOUR BODY

Whatever type of exercise you and your doctor have decided on, the key is to pay attention to your body's warning signs. Stop exercising if you have any of the following unusual symptoms:

- Dizziness or feeling faint
- Headache
- Shortness of breath before exertion or difficulty getting your breath whilst exercising

- Pain or palpitations in your chest
- Pain in your abdomen, back, pelvis or pubic area
- Weakness in your muscles
- Pain or swelling in your legs
- Painful uterine contractions
- Reduced foetal movements
- Leakage from your water bag
- Vaginal bleeding

In particular, those who have a medical condition before or during pregnancy, such as heart disease or high blood pressure, or have complications such as bleeding in pregnancy, please consult your doctors before embarking on any exercise.

Additionally, if you have pre-existing or gestational diabetes mellitus, do take particular care when exercising by monitoring your blood glucose, eating at regular times and resting at specific times. Those who have low blood sugar level should limit the workout to no more than 45 minutes at a time.

STAY IN SHAPE

There is no doubt that regular exercise is an important part of having a healthy pregnancy, so don't hesitate to discuss with your doctor and work out an appropriate exercise plan. **LWB**

RISKY BUSINESS

Dr Goh cautions that overexertion and inappropriate exercises will increase the likelihood of harm to you and your baby. Risks include:

- **HYPERTHERMIA:** This is a condition that occurs when your body gets too hot. If your body temperature rises above 39.2°C in the first trimester, this may affect the baby's development leading to disability at birth. Reduce this risk by drinking lots of water before and during exercise, avoid overexerting yourself, and don't exercise in very hot environments like a "hot" yoga studio.
- **HYPOTENSION:** When you lie flat on your back, the growing baby presses on the main blood vessels. As a result, less blood is pumped around your body and this may lead to low blood pressure, also known as hypotension. This is more likely after 16 weeks of pregnancy hence, avoid exercises that involve lying flat on your back to reduce this risk.
- **HYPOXIA:** Avoid exercising at altitudes over 2500 metres as your baby could get hypoxia, which is when there is insufficient oxygen in the baby's body.