

Women's health

Weight Training through pregnancy

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Pregnancy is a time of transformation for your body. Exercise can be a critical part of your new routine and help with anything from aches and pains to powering through labour.

Knowing what types of exercises are safe is key to staying injury-free and keeping you and your baby healthy throughout the next 9 months.

Do you like lifting weights? Well, resistance training can be a part of your workout plan — if you do it the right way. Here's more on how much you should lift, what exercises to do and which to avoid, and what questions you should ask your doctor.

IS WEIGHT LIFTING SAFE DURING ALL THREE TRIMESTERS?

Unfortunately, there isn't a one-size-fits-all answer to this question. If you regularly lifted weights before pregnancy, it's very likely you can continue with some modifications. **If you're new to lifting, you should speak with your doctor first.**

In the first trimester of pregnancy, you may be able to continue with your routine without much change. However, as the weeks and months move forward, you may need to decrease your weight, change what moves you do, and try other tools, like resistance bands.

BENEFITS OF WEIGHT LIFTING WHILE PREGNANT

Weight training during pregnancy can be a great partner to other types of moderate exercise, like walking or swimming. Lifting weights strengthens muscles throughout the entire body and can help you feel better on the inside and out.

Researchers looked at a variety of studies on weight-bearing exercise and pregnant women and published their findings in the *Strength and Conditioning Journal*. Researchers found that benefits include:

- **Better weight management.** People who regularly exercise in pregnancy may gain 20% less weight than their fewer active counterparts.
- **Lower risk of gestational diabetes (GDM).** People who exercise during pregnancy may also reduce their chances of developing GDM by up to 59%.
- **Lower risk of preeclampsia.** Light exercise may reduce the incidence of preeclampsia by 24%. Vigorous exercise, on the other hand, may reduce it by as much as 54%.
- **Improved body image.** Other studies noted that people who exercise throughout pregnancy often report a better self-image. Researchers found that sedentary folks often report feeling "fat" or "unattractive." People who exercise 90 minutes a week or more have a "significantly" more positive body image.
- **Better mood.** Along with this, feelings about body image, hormonal changes, and other shifts make pregnancy a prime time for depression. Exercise may mitigate this by releasing endorphins, which are powerful neurotransmitters that relieve pain and stress.
- **Protects against lower back pain.** Up to 76% of pregnant women reported having back pain at some point during their pregnancies. Staying active — particularly focusing on the muscles in the trunk and core — may maintain better back health.
- **Helps with baby's development.** Babies of people who exercise regularly tend to be longer and leaner. Some studies show that resistance training, in particular, may be especially good in this regard. Beyond that, babies born to those who exercised vigorously during pregnancy actually showed "heightened attentiveness and discipline" when compared to controls.
- **Helps you power through labour.** Along with a lower chance of caesarean delivery and preterm labour, people who do resistance training tend to have shorter active labours.

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WHY YOU SHOULD TALK WITH YOUR DOCTOR

All people and all pregnancies are different. Even if you were active before pregnancy or in your last pregnancy, there are certain situations where your doctor may not give you the green light.

Plus, it's important to remember that your body will change during pregnancy in ways you may not even realise.

- **The hormone Relaxin loosens your joints and ligaments to prepare the body for delivery.** All this new mobility makes you more prone to injury from overextending yourself with fast or high-impact movements.
- **Your balance changes as your centre of gravity changes.** You may be more prone to falling. This change may also put considerable strain on your lower back and pelvis.
- **Your oxygen needs increase when you're pregnant.** When you work out, oxygen and blood flow go to your muscles. You may become out of breath more quickly and you may find more vigorous exercise more difficult as a result.

There are also various complications you may encounter during your pregnancy. You'll want to speak with your doctor before lifting or trying other types of exercise if:

- You're pregnant with twins, triplets, or other higher-order multiples.
- You have heart or lung disease.
- You have a cerclage in place.
- You're 26 or more weeks pregnant and have been diagnosed with placenta previa.
- You're experiencing preterm labour or your water has broken.
- You have preeclampsia.
- You have severe anaemia

HEAVINESS OF WEIGHTS

There's no clear safe and appropriate weight limit for all pregnant people. Instead, how much you can lift has to do with things like your previous fitness level, how far along you are, and how you're feeling.

You'll want to let your doctor or midwife know about your activity level before your pregnancy.

For some perspective, even elite athletes — those who train at high levels more than 2 hours a day for several years in a certain sport — reduce their resistance load. There are no specifics given with regard to weight, however.

And while this research isn't specifically about working out, scientists have looked at lifting heavy loads during pregnancy. People who repetitively lift at their jobs may be at risk of delivering their babies before 32 weeks.

Specifically, researchers found that lifting items over 20 kilograms (44 pounds) more than 10 times a day creates the highest risk of preterm birth.

WEIGHT-LIFTING EXERCISES TO DO WHILE PREGNANT

You may be able to continue doing your usual lifting schedule, just be sure to check in with your doctor or ask a certified trainer for advice on modifications that may help as you and your baby grow.

Try lifting three times per week, focusing on the total body during your sessions versus splitting things up into target muscle groups (for example, hit multiple body parts versus just leg day).

Of course, you can do whatever you like in this regard, but you may experience more swelling in the areas you work.

Beyond that, the emphasis should be on more repetitions at a lower weight than you might be used to (70 percent of your max).

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FIRST TRIMESTER

In the first trimester, try these moves.

Muscle group	Exercise	Sets	Reps
Back	Lat pulldown	2 - 3	10-15
Shoulders	Shoulder press	2 - 3	10-15
Chest	Dumbbell chest press	2 - 3	10-15
Biceps	Concentration curl	2 - 3	10-15
Triceps	Lying tricep extension	2 - 3	10-15
Quads/glutes	Lunge	2 - 3	10-15
Glutes/hamstring	Stiff-legged deadlift	2 - 3	10-15
Calves	Calf raises	2 - 3	10-15
Core	Crunch	2 - 3	10-15
Core	Plank	2 - 3	timed
Core	Side plank	2 - 3	timed

SECOND AND THIRD TRIMESTERS

Your body and baby continue growing at a quick rate until delivery. Much of this weight may be around your midsection, making previous core exercises quite difficult to perform.

There are other considerations as well, like discontinuing moves that require you to lay flat on your back and compress the large vein that carries blood from your lower half to your heart (vena cava).

Try:

Muscle groups	Exercise	Sets	Reps
Back	Seated row	1 - 3	10-15
Shoulders	Lateral raise	1 - 3	10-15
Chest	Seated machine chest press	1 - 3	10-15
Biceps	Dumbbell curl	1 - 3	10-15
Triceps	Tricep kickback	1 - 3	10-15
Quads/glutes	Dumbbell squat	1 - 3	10-15
Glutes/hamstring	Cable back-kick	1 - 3	10-15
Calves	Standing calf raise	1 - 3	10-15
Core	Plank	1 - 3	10-15
Core	Bird dog	1 - 3	timed
Core	Side plank	1 - 3	timed

No matter what moves you do, be sure to focus on your form over how many reps you complete or weight you lift. Keeping good posture will protect your back and other muscles from injury.

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WEIGHT-LIFTING EXERCISES TO AVOID WHILE PREGNANT

You'll want to steer clear of workout spaces that are hot or humid. The temperature could cause you to overheat, especially dangerous in the first trimester when many of your baby's systems are developing.

Also avoid:

- **High-impact moves where there's a risk of blunt force trauma.** This may mean skipping exercise that involves hulking heavy free weights around your belly.
- **Lifting overhead after the first trimester.** Why? Your posture changes, and lifting over your head may place strain on your lower back. To work those deltoids and rotator cuff muscles, try front raises, lateral raises, and reverse flies instead of shoulder presses.
- **Lying flat on your back after the first trimester.** Again, it places pressure on your vena cava and can impact the blood supply to the placenta. This can make you feel dizzy.
- **Bending forward at the hips and/or waist after the first trimester.** This may make you feel dizzy. As your belly grows, you may also find it hurts your lower back. Try instead an all-fours position if you're looking to work those glutes and hamstrings.

Stop exercising right away and get in touch with your doctor if you experience vaginal bleeding or rupture of your membranes, or if you experience a decrease in your baby's movements.

The following are other warning signs:

- dizziness
- headache
- chest pain
- weakness in your muscles
- shortness of breath
- pain or swelling in your calves

ADDITIONAL TIPS

Above anything else, listen to your body. You may have days where you feel great and can smash even the hardest workouts. You may have others where something feels off or you're simply more tired or sick than usual.

Other tips:

- Aim to get 150 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise each week. Your effort should make you break a sweat, but you should be able to speak without getting out of breath.
- New to exercise? Start small — even just 5 minutes of movement is beneficial. Over time, you can work your way up to exercising 30 minutes a day several days a week.
- Stay hydrated. You should aim to drink 10 cups of fluids a day — more after exercise. Good choices include water, non-caffeinated tea, milk, and juices.
- Consider using resistance bands if weights are getting awkward. These stretchy bands allow you to work with some tension with more comfort.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Weight training can be a safe part of your pregnancy exercise routine. Speak with your doctor about your current fitness level and your goals.

Consider scaling back your weight and focusing on your posture to avoid low back pain and muscle strain.

Pay attention to how your body is feeling each time you exercise and change your routine accordingly.

If you experience any warning signs, take a step back and re-evaluate.