

# Guide to Running Whilst Pregnant

This document is for information only, please check with your doctor / midwife first before continuing with your running.

The combination of pregnancy and exercise has long been the subject of controversy in medical and running circles. In the past pregnancy has almost been treated as an illness, with the afflicted advised to put their feet up and refrain from any exertion.

In recent times, however, both elite athletes and ordinary members of the public who wish to exercise whilst pregnant have shown that it is possible to do so sensibly without any ill effects to either mother or child. Indeed, exercising up to a point whilst pregnant can be beneficial to both.

## **What happens to your body when pregnant?**

When you become pregnant, your circulatory system changes, hormones are released into your body. Your body temperature increases, as does your metabolism, whilst bone density is maintained and your ligaments relax.

The beauty of running is its simplicity. If you are already a runner, you will likely want to continue running during pregnancy. In general, running is a safe activity that many pregnant women continue, with modification, throughout pregnancy. If you have never run before, now is not the time to start. If you are a seasoned runner, you will enjoy the journey ahead.

## **Starting the Run**

If you are the type who laces up your shoes and then bounds out the door without stretching, change your ways! Now that you are carrying a future runner, you need to take some extra precautions. More than ever, proper stretching both before and after running will help prevent injuries. Relaxin, the hormone that relaxes your ligaments, is working throughout pregnancy. Loose joints and ligaments make you more vulnerable to injury so concentrate on stretches for your large muscles ... hamstrings, quadriceps, calf muscles, Achilles and lower back muscles. Gentle easy stretching is the best.

## **Listen to Your Body**

You will need to modify the intensity, frequency, and speed of your runs. Remember, you are running to maintain your fitness, not to train. Slow down – do not push your pace, and do not push your distance. Back off running a preset course if you just do not feel like doing it.

Stop and walk if you feel Braxton Hicks contractions (rhythmic tightening of the lower abdomen) or ligament pain. **Stop if you feel pain, persistent contractions, leakage of fluid, fatigue, dizziness, or any medical problem.**

## **Running in Early Pregnancy**

You may experience bouts of nausea and fatigue the first few months. Try running outdoors if you normally run on an indoor track. The fresh air may help. If you find yourself losing weight from vomiting, cut back on your running or stop until you are gaining adequate weight. Talk to your health care provider.

Fatigue can be perplexing the first few months. As an active woman, you are used to feeling energetic most of the time. Before pregnancy, if you felt sluggish, you probably went out for a run to regain some vigour. Now you may be more inclined to curl up for a nap.

Schedule your run at a time of day when you feel least tired. Do not push it. It can be frustrating -- in your mind, you know that running will probably make you feel better, but your body is saying "doze". If running seems too much for today, substitute a brisk walk, a few laps in the pool, or spinning on a stationary bike.

Running with tender swollen breasts is uncomfortable. Buy a good supportive bra with side adjustable straps or a sports bra. As weeks go by, you may need to move up to a larger size. Urinary frequency, one of the early signs of pregnancy, is a challenge. For running you need to devise some strategic plans, Do not cut back on your fluids ... you need to stay well-hydrated. Plan your runs around a toilet stop.

Be sure to immediately stop any racing, speed work, or vigorous long runs once you learn you are pregnant.

## **Running in Later Pregnancy**

At midpoint (four to seven months) you may feel your best, but you'll also be aware of the added weight and minor aches and pains. It is time to slow down, decrease your mileage, and consider women running alternatives.

Most women cut back their mileage 30 to 40% by the second trimester and up to 70% in the last weeks. Some women stop running altogether because of the extra weight and abdominal pressure. Your running gait changes so be alert to terrain and traffic. You tend to not pick up your feet as high and your stride shortens.

If running becomes uncomfortable, consider non-weight bearing options for exercise. As a runner, you have probably already engaged in cross-training activities. If you are planning a pregnancy and run exclusively, now, before conception, is the time to introduce yourself to some other activities, such as swimming, cycling, low impact aerobics and walking.

## **In the first trimester**

In early pregnancy all of the above changes can cause a woman to feel quite awful, experiencing nausea, fatigue and dizziness. Any of these factors can result in you not wanting to exercise in this time, but it is important to remember that exercise can offset many of the unpleasant aspects of early pregnancy.

For those wanting to exercise in this early period but who do not know where to start, here is a possible solution:

### **First Trimester, example training programme:**

**Day 1:** Warm-up, 20 minute brisk walk with abdominal & pelvic floor exercises, then stretch.

**Day 2:** Rest day.

**Day 3:** 20 minute swim.

**Day 4:** Rest Day.

**Day 5:** As per Day 1.

**Day 6:** Rest Day.

**Day 7:** Long Leisurely Walk.

## **In the second trimester**

At this point you may find yourself feeling better and more energetic, and therefore more able to cope with more exercise with slightly more intensity:

### **Second Trimester, example training programme:**

**Day 1:** 30 -40 minutes brisk walk, abdominal & pelvic floor exercises (after Month 4 miss out any exercise which means that you have to lie on your back)

**Day 2:** 30 minute swim.

**Day 3:** Rest Day.

**Day 4:** 30-40 minute cycle/swim/walk/jog

**Day 5:** As per Day 1.

**Day 6:** Rest Day.

**Day 7:** Leisurely Walk.

### **In the third trimester**

As you are getting larger you may feel more tired and disinclined to exercise. Accordingly, the exercise programmes for the First & Second Trimesters should be adapted according to how you feel. If you really feel that that:

1. You do not have the time.
2. You do not have the motivation, or
3. You do not want to risk a lot of exercising, try the following:
  - Use stairs not lifts or escalators whenever possible.
  - Walk wherever you can.
  - Aim to be active for at least 20 minutes per day.
  - Why exercise when pregnant at all?

Previous wisdom has suggested that pregnant women should not exercise at all, and should be treated as fragile, almost as if pregnancy was an illness which they had contracted. However, exercising can have the following benefits:

- You will feel better about yourself.
- Labour should be easier because you will be fitter, stronger and generally better equipped to handle it.
- Your recovery from giving birth will be quicker.
- You will gain less excess weight while pregnant.
- You will be more positive about yourself and your body.

### **Do's and Don't of exercising when pregnant:**

#### **Do:**

- Exercise with a friend if possible – this will dispel any boredom and help if you get into any difficulties – always carry a fully charged mobile phone and tell people where you are going.
- Make sure that you drink plenty of water to avoid dehydration.
- Pay attention to any discomfort whilst exercising and stop immediately.
- Make your exercise fun. Look at it as quality time for yourself and not a chore to get through – enjoy yourself!

#### **Don't:**

- Ignore fatigue. Rest if you feel tired – listen to your body!
- Continue if you are in pain, especially in the pelvic and abdominal region.
- Be rigid with your programme. Adapt & change it according to how you feel.
- Overheat.
- Pelvic floor exercises

Half of the women in the UK today have problems with their pelvic floor which causes discomfort and distress for those affected.

The pelvic floor supports the pelvic organs & their contents. Pregnancy causes additional pressure which can result in stress incontinence and/or a prolapse. In order to strengthen the pelvic floor and reduce the chances of pelvic problems during pregnancy, try the following:

Imagine that you are desperate for the toilet, holding and then relaxing the pelvic floor as often as possible throughout the day. This will help strengthen the pelvic region. A weak pelvic floor can be very distressing but something can be done to avoid it. It makes no difference what age you are or how many children you have already had, it is never too late to strengthen your pelvic floor!

### **Run with Caution – listen to your body, your doctor and your midwife.**

Though many doctors do not mind their patients continuing to run while pregnant, there are some medical situations that may cause a woman's health practitioner to say she should not run. These may include pregnancy-induced high blood pressure, gestational diabetes and others, particularly a history of pre-term labour or miscarriage. If a woman is carrying twins, her doctor may also ask her to abstain from running.

Do be very cautious when running on uneven surfaces. Your centre of gravity changes as your abdomen expands. Some experts suggest running on a treadmill at a gym after the second trimester to avoid potentially harmful falls.

Another thing to remember is that your feet often get bigger with pregnancy. Watch the fit of your shoes and move up to a bigger size as needed.

Remember that many women stop running at some point during their pregnancy so allow yourself the leeway to stop if you are no longer comfortable.