Fit Mamas

How to safely stay in shape during pregnancy

May 27, 2008 By Kimberly Garrison

One in six—that's how many pregnant women exercise at recommended levels, according to a study conducted by Saint Louis University School of Public Health. When it comes to African-American women, that percentage may be even smaller because of long-held misperceptions and old wives' tales. Many sistas are afraid to exercise during pregnancy for fear of doing harm to their babies. But not exercising is by far the real problem, leaving many expectant mothers drained and ill prepared for the big D-Day.

The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists recommends that pregnant women who are free of medical or obstetric complications exercise moderately for a minimum of 30 minutes most days of the week. On the other hand, exercise is not advised for women with certain risk factors such as preterm labor. Be sure to check with your physician before beginning or continuing any exercise routine.

Besides feeling good, fit mamas-to-be tend to have shorter labors. Babies also benefit because "a healthy mom makes for a healthy baby, and a recent report showed a 40 percent reduction in preterm birth among exercising moms," according to Michal Elovitz, MD, program director of the Center for Research on Reproduction and Women's Health at the University of Pennsylvania Hospital in Philadelphia. Exercise can help prevent or minimize the excessive pregnancy weight gain that puts too many black women at risk for complications. It may even reduce the likelihood of preeclampsia (high blood pressure during pregnancy) and gestational diabetes.

The best exercises for pregnant women of all fitness levels are cardiovascular—brisk walking, stationary cycling, low-impact aerobics and swimming. Seasoned exercisers can continue to work out at their pre-pregnancy levels after checking with their doctor. Additionally, prenatal yoga, tai chi and resistance training (no more than 5-pound free weights for beginners) can offer expectant moms the flexibility, balance and strength they'll need throughout pregnancy and postpartum.

Kimberly Garrison is a certified personal trainer and fitness columnist for the Philadelphia Daily News.

Dos & Don'ts

Do warm up for 10 to 15 minutes before exercising	**Don't** continue exercising if you feel faint, have shortness of breath, pain or vaginal bleeding
Do a minimum of 30 minutes of moderate cardiovascular exercise, such as brisk walking, most days of the week	**Don't** get overheated or allow your heart rate to exceed 140 BPM
Do maintain your strength with two to three days of mild weight or resistance training	**Don't** exercise on your back in the second and third trimesters
Do cool down and stretch five to 10 minutes at the end of your routine	**Don't** participate in risky sports like in-line skating, basketball, volleyball, horseback riding or skiing

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