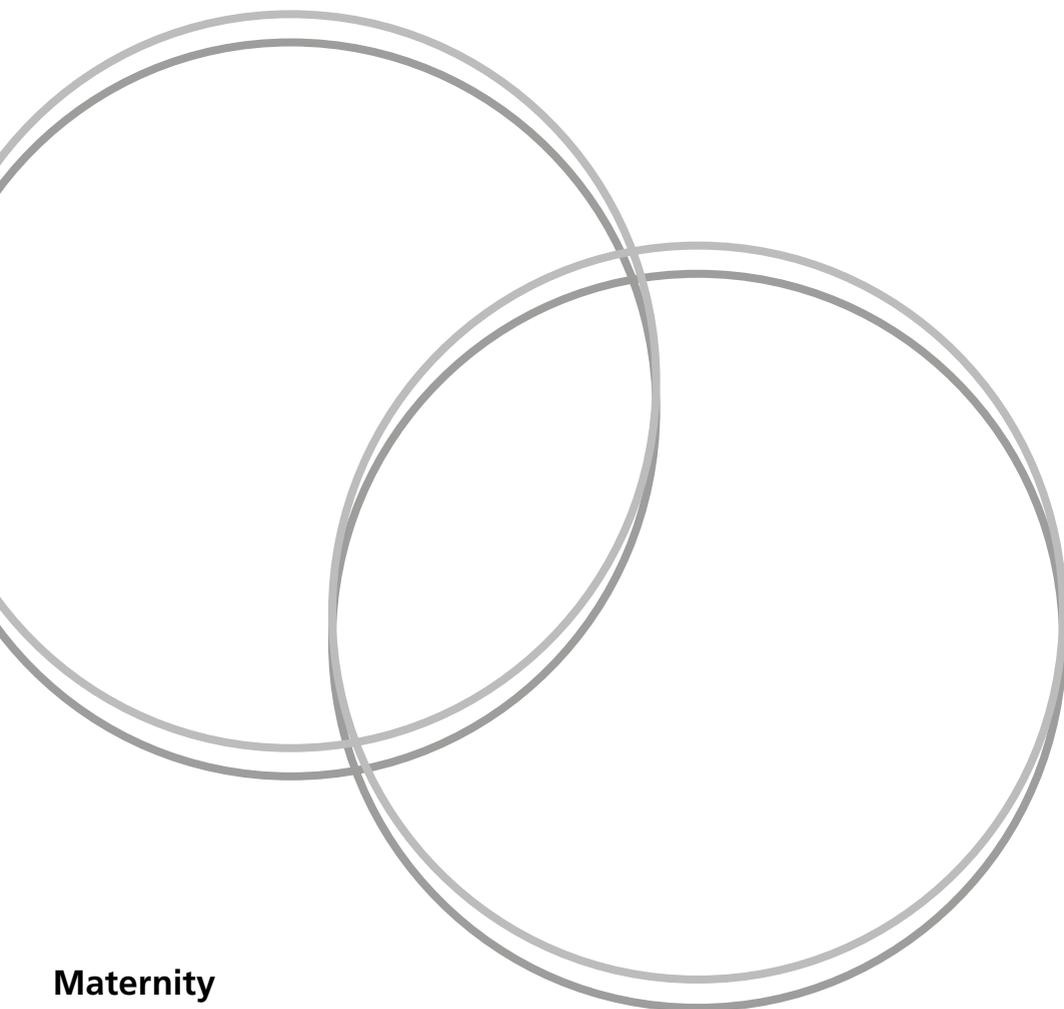




Oxford University Hospitals  
NHS Foundation Trust

# Physical activity and gestational diabetes

Information for women



Maternity

Staying physically active throughout pregnancy has a wide range of benefits, from managing weight gain to improving your mood. Keeping active and following a healthy diet makes up a key part of managing gestational diabetes.

Regular moderate physical activity/exercise has been shown to be an effective tool in managing your blood glucose (sugar) level, which may prevent, reduce or delay the need for medication.

## **How does keeping active help to control my blood glucose levels?**

When you have gestational diabetes your blood glucose levels tend to be higher than normal. Moderate physical activity/exercise can help lower blood glucose levels in two ways:

1. When you exercise, your muscles use up glucose from the bloodstream and so blood glucose levels fall.
2. After activity, your muscles remain more sensitive to the effects of insulin (the hormone involved in decreasing blood glucose) which means that your blood glucose levels stay lower for longer.

Just a 30-minute brisk walk after meals has been shown to help control blood glucose levels. Many women who find it hard to control their blood glucose levels through diet alone find it helpful to introduce more exercise/activity into their daily routine and it is a great treatment alongside diet changes.

# What are the other benefits of being active during pregnancy?

Being physically active:



improves the fitness of your heart and lungs, which need to work harder when you are pregnant



helps prevent excess weight gain during pregnancy



reduces the risk of blood pressure problems



improves your mood and reduces stress/anxiety levels



helps you get a better night's sleep and have more energy

**Most importantly, there is no evidence that doing moderate physical activity causes any harm to you or your baby.**

# Every Activity Counts

## What is physical activity and what counts as moderate?

Activity doesn't have to be strenuous to be beneficial and doesn't have to be in a gym or exercise class to count. Anything that makes you breathe faster whilst still being able to hold a conversation would be classed as moderate activity.

There are many types of activity and they include:



Swimming



Cycling



Yoga/Pilates



Dancing



Brisk walking



Housework/Gardening

- Home workouts (for more details see the Moving Medicine Leaflet: Strength exercises for pregnant women)

# Not currently active? Start gradually

## I'm new to physical activity. How should I start?

This is the ideal time for you to begin, but it's fine to start small and build up gradually. Find something you enjoy, as this will help you stick with it. Brisk walking is a great way to get more active during pregnancy. You don't need any special clothing or equipment and can build it into your daily routine. Here are some ideas:



Walking the children to school or going for a short, brisk walk at lunchtime/after meals.



Taking the stairs rather than the lift.



Joining a pregnancy specific exercise class – this is a great way to meet people.



Getting off the bus a stop earlier and walking the rest of the way.

As your fitness increases, aim to walk a little further and enjoy your activity for longer.

If you are new to being physically active, you should consider avoiding certain activities due to their intensity. These include strenuous strength training (weight lifting), racquet sports (squash) and running.

***It is never too late to start***

# Already active? Keep going

## **Can I carry on with my pre-pregnancy activities?**

Yes, if you are already active you should try to maintain your physical activity levels. However, you may find that you have to adapt to find the most comfortable activity. For example, replacing contact sports with non-contact sport, or strenuous strength training with a body weight exercise class like yoga or Pilates. Remember to find something you enjoy.

## **How much activity should I be doing?**

Aim for 150 minutes of moderate activity every week. The advice for pregnant women is the same as for any adult. In addition, it is recommended that pregnant women perform 8–12 repetitions of muscle strengthening activities involving all major muscle groups twice per week. These can be anything from body weight exercises to carrying shopping bags. (See the Moving Medicine Leaflet: Strength exercises for pregnant women for more details)

## **Although this might sound like a lot, it is important to remember:**

You don't have to achieve this level straight away, levels can be built up over many weeks. Even a small increase in the amount of activity can make a big difference to your health – something is better than nothing.

Every activity counts and it can be broken down into just a few bouts of a couple minutes throughout the day. You could start with one or two 10-minute sessions every day, building up to five 30-minute sessions a week. Some days you'll have a bit more time than others, so you can plan your activity into your week.

## **Listen to your body and adapt**

Whatever you chose to do, you'll need to listen to your body and adapt your activity as your pregnancy progresses. For example, if you were running earlier in your pregnancy, you might need to slow to a light jog or a brisk walk as the weeks go on. Swimming is great, especially towards the end of your pregnancy, as it makes you feel weightless and is good for your joints.

# Don't bump the bump



## What should I avoid?

- Avoid contact sports or sports where there is a high risk of falls or injury in pregnancy, even if you were doing these before pregnancy. These include skiing, water skiing, off-road cycling, and horse riding.
- You should avoid scuba diving or exercising at an altitude of over 2,000 metres.
- Avoid overheating and very vigorous activity. It is not recommended to exercise for more than 45 minutes, especially in hot, humid conditions.
- Avoid lying flat on your back as your pregnancy progresses, as this could put pressure on your blood vessels and reduce the blood supply returning to your heart. If you go to any classes where you might need to lie flat, you should change your position to incorporate this advice – tell your instructor.
- Pregnancy can affect your balance and you have a higher risk of falls. You might need additional support with stretching or balancing.

## Do I need worry about low blood glucose levels?



Approximately 60% of women with gestational diabetes do not need medication and can manage their condition with lifestyle changes and monitoring. The risk of physical activity/exercise causing low blood glucose levels is very low if you are not taking medication or if you are taking Metformin.



If you take any medication to lower your blood glucose levels such as insulin or glibenclamide, we recommend discussing your physical activity/exercise with your doctor or Diabetes Specialist Midwife. This is because the combination of certain medications and moderate exercise can lead to low blood glucose levels.

## Do I need any special equipment?



No. It is important to stay cool; wear loose and comfortable clothing. Keep well hydrated – remember to carry water with you. As your breasts increase in size during pregnancy, a well-fitted, supportive bra will make activity more comfortable.

If you go to classes, make sure your instructor knows that you are pregnant.

# When should I stop exercising?



**If it feels good keep going – if it is uncomfortable stop and seek advice.**

If an activity is uncomfortable, slow down or take a break, and see if you feel better. If you don't feel better, stop the activity and seek medical advice. This is especially important if you notice that you're very breathless without any activity or with minimal activity, or you have chest pains, severe headaches, dizziness, muscle weakness, calf swelling or pain.

If you have a medical condition or are diagnosed with any other complications during your pregnancy, you should check with your doctor or midwife that it's safe to keep doing your current activities. However, for most medical conditions, light/moderate intensity activity is still recommended.

# How to keep motivated

Staying motivated to keep active in pregnancy can be a challenge, especially in the early and later stages of your pregnancy. Here are some tips:



Try to find local activities that you enjoy (your community midwife may be able to provide a list of local activities that are recommended).



Build activity into your daily routine.



Do activity with friends and family.



Set some realistic, achievable goals.



Track and record your activities using an activity device/ pedometer – you will be surprised how much you are already doing. Many smartphones have step counters and there are hundreds of free apps to track your activity.

## **Further information**

### **Here for Health – Health Improvement Advice Centre**

Oxford University Hospitals drop-in centre for advice and support on healthy living, including physical activity, diet, smoking, alcohol and emotional wellbeing.

Tel: **01865 221 429**

(Monday to Friday, 9.00am to 5.00pm)

Email: **hereforhealth@ouh.nhs.uk**

Website: **www.ouh.nhs.uk/HereforHealth**

### **Department of Health (GOV.UK) information**

Website: **bit.ly/startactiveinfo**

If you need an interpreter or would like this information leaflet in another format, such as Easy Read, large print, Braille, audio, electronically or another language, please speak to the department where you are being seen. You will find their contact details on your appointment letter.

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