

# Physical activity and gestational diabetes during pregnancy and post-partum



Physical activity is not dangerous for you or your baby. Some people believe that physical activity may cause the baby to shake around, but this is not true.

It is important to take part in regular physical activity during your pregnancy and post-partum (once the baby has been born), especially if been diagnosed with Gestational Diabetes Mellitus (GDM). This helps to keep you and your baby healthy.

## 1. Benefits of physical activity during pregnancy

### How will it benefit you?

- Helps you to control blood sugar levels
- Increases your likelihood of a healthy pregnancy
- Reduces your risk of developing other health conditions
- Helps you to manage your weight and blood sugar levels
- Supports your mental health and wellbeing
- Keeps your body healthy
- Keeps your baby healthy

### How will it benefit your baby?

- **Improved brain development:** babies born to mums who were active while pregnant show advanced brain development. The positive effects on the baby's brain development are found to carry on after the baby is born
- **Improved blood flow to baby:** taking part in regular physical activity while pregnant improves blood flow to the unborn baby. This improves the amount of oxygen and nutrients the baby receives while developing. This leads to a healthier weight and overall development of the baby during pregnancy
- **Healthier heart:** exercise during pregnancy improves the strength and health of the baby's heart. The positive effects on the baby's heart and heart rate are found to carry on after the baby is born

## Moderate physical activity

You should still be able to hold a conversation during physical activity. If you become breathless, you're probably pushing yourself too hard. Ensure you discuss your plans for physical activity with your GP or midwife so they can support you on how often and for how long.

## Avoid sitting down as much as possible

Limiting the time, you spend sitting down (being sedentary) can help. This can be difficult if you work in an office or feel tired. But you could try:

- Walking to work
- Getting off the bus a stop earlier
- Walking around the office
- Setting a reminder on your phone to stand up and move around
- Taking the stairs instead of the lift or escalator
- Going for a walk on your lunch break
- Doing housework
- Make habits active (e.g., calf extensions while you brush your teeth)

## Physical activities examples

- Walking
- Swimming
- Jogging/running
- Yoga and Pilates (avoid hot yoga such as Bikram)
- Aerobics
- Pelvic floor and core exercises
- Low-impact aerobics
- Stationary bike
- Strength training
- Swimming or aqua aerobics

## Physical activities to avoid

- Exercises that involve lying down on your back after 16 weeks
- Contact sports, especially martial arts
- Any sports that involve a high risk of falling
- Scuba diving
- Swimming or aqua aerobics in water over 32 degree Celsius

## Keeping safe while taking part in physical activity

- Take an emergency snack with you (see 'managing blood sugar' levels info page for a list of emergency snacks)
- Check your blood sugar levels before, during and after physical activity to ensure they are not too low (if below 4mmol/l follow your hypo treatment)
- Hydrate before, during and after physical activity
- Avoid physical activity during high humidity or heat
- Wear sun protection if outside (e.g., cap, sun lotion, sunglasses)

- Avoid carrying unnecessary items or bags (e.g., choose a belt bag or small rucksack instead of a handbag)
- Listen to your body and stop if you start to feel unwell (check your blood sugar levels and eat an emergency snack if your levels have gone too low)
- Eat something before and after you do physical activity (e.g., fruit, yoghurt, 2-3 whole wheat crackers or oatcakes)

## Physical activity guidelines during pregnancy



## 2. Benefits of physical activity post-partum

Engaging in physical activity post-partum can offer numerous benefits for new mothers. Here are some of the key advantages:

- **Supports a healthy weight management:** Regular exercise can help with improving overall fitness and post-pregnancy weight management
- **Boosts your mood:** Taking part in physical activity boosts hormones associated with happiness, improving your mood and making you feel happier
- **Helps to improve your sleep:** It can promote better sleep, which is often disrupted in the postpartum period
- **Strengthens muscles:** Physical activity helps to strengthen the abdominal and pelvic floor muscles, which can be beneficial after childbirth
- **Increases energy levels:** Regular physical activity can boost energy levels, helping new mothers cope with the demands of parenthood
- **Enhances cardiovascular health:** Improving heart and lung health
- **Reduces risk of chronic diseases:** Exercise can decrease the risk of conditions like GDM and pre-eclampsia during subsequent pregnancies
- **Provides social interaction:** Group exercise classes offer the opportunity for social interaction, which can be supportive during the post-partum period

It's important to note that while physical activity is beneficial, it should be resumed gradually after childbirth and tailored to individual health, recovery and fitness levels.

### Physical activities examples

For someone who has had GDM it's important to engage in physical activities that are safe and beneficial for post-partum recovery. Here are some recommended exercises:

- **Walking:** A gentle, low-intensity exercise that can be started soon after delivery
- **Swimming:** Provides a full-body workout and is easy on the joints
- **Stationary Cycling:** A good cardiovascular exercise that minimises strain on the body
- **Modified Yoga:** Helps with flexibility and stress reduction; ensure to avoid intense poses

### Physical activities to avoid

When resuming exercise post-partum, especially after having GDM, there are certain activities and practices that should be avoided to ensure health and safety:

- **High-Impact Activities:** Avoid exercises like running or jumping that can put too much strain on the pelvic floor muscles
- **Heavy Lifting:** Lifting heavy weights can be risky, particularly in the early weeks after childbirth
- **Intense Abdominal Workouts:** Exercises like crunches or sit-ups should be avoided initially as they can put pressure on the weakened abdominal area

- **Rapid Weight Loss:** Aiming for quick weight loss through extreme dieting or exercise can be harmful to your health and recovery
- **Ignoring Pain:** If you experience pain during any activity, it's important to stop and consult with a healthcare provider
- **Overexertion:** Listen to your body and avoid pushing yourself too hard, which can lead to exhaustion and injury
- **Dehydration:** Stay hydrated, especially if you are breastfeeding, as dehydration can affect milk supply

## Important help and advice

**Before starting or changing any exercise routine**, it's crucial to consult with a healthcare professional, especially after a GDM diagnosis. They can provide personalised advice and ensure that the exercise plan is safe and effective for your specific health needs.

Remember, the goal is to aid recovery and manage blood glucose levels, not to overexert yourself.

Start slowly and increase the intensity and duration of your workouts gradually as you feel more comfortable and as advised by your healthcare provider.

## Physical activity guidelines post-partum



## Signposting

### Videos

#### Reed Wellbeing

Exercise Referral Practitioners have created these exercise videos. They focus on 3 aspects of physical fitness: strength, cardio and core stability. They are split into 3 levels of intensity, so you can choose depending on your preference and ability.

- **Level 1 intensity exercise:**  
[https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLJaT\\_rOXF0WWyuBLd5WoTFcT2sFWtTGrF](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLJaT_rOXF0WWyuBLd5WoTFcT2sFWtTGrF)
- **Level 2 intensity exercise:**  
[https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLJaT\\_rOXF0WX2DndEVk-pzNGCu7Rk9sjR](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLJaT_rOXF0WX2DndEVk-pzNGCu7Rk9sjR)
- **Level 3 intensity exercise:**  
[https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLJaT\\_rOXF0WVa1rWXwOPkKou-PGa5M7rL](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLJaT_rOXF0WVa1rWXwOPkKou-PGa5M7rL)

#### Body Project

**Low impact exercise:** [www.youtube.com/channel/UCFjc9H89-RpWuStDqhO7AQ](http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCFjc9H89-RpWuStDqhO7AQ)

#### NHS

**NHS fitness studio:** [www.nhs.uk/conditions/nhs-fitness-studio/](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/nhs-fitness-studio/)

**Pelvic floor exercise:** [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LMinQ\\_ai1hU&ab\\_channel=NHS](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LMinQ_ai1hU&ab_channel=NHS)

#### Apps

**Active 10**

**Track steps and set goals:** <https://www.nhs.uk/better-health/get-active/>

### Online resources

#### This Mum Moves

**Exercise resources:** [www.activepregnancyfoundation.org/thismummoves-mums](http://www.activepregnancyfoundation.org/thismummoves-mums)

#### Diabetes UK

**Blood sugar levels and exercise:** <https://www.diabetes.org.uk/guide-to-diabetes/managing-your-diabetes/exercise/blood-sugar-levels#:~:text=Some%20people%20may%20find%20that,sugars%20after%20you%20finish%20exercising.>



## UK Chief Medical Officer

Physical activity guidelines during and after pregnancy:

<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/620a28288fa8f54916f45dfc/physical-activity-for-pregnant-women.pdf>

[Physical activity for women after childbirth \(birth to 12 months\) \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)