



techniques is a great way to dispel fear and build confidence, so that by the time labour arrives it will feel like second nature.

With the right mindset the game is half-won. On the physical side many mothers confess that they've never exercised as diligently as when they were doing it for two. Aim for around 45 minutes of moderate, steady, low-impact exercise three times a week. **The following types of exercise are typically beneficial to pregnant women:**

• **Walking** – Do it early in the morning or late afternoon for the cool fresh air. Blood through the veins and the wind in your hair is good for you, and is wonderfully empowering.

• **Swimming or water aerobics** – This is a great form of exercise/resistance training for all muscle groups because your weight is supported in a wonderfully cool medium while you're immersed.

• **Yoga and Pilates** – Good for toning the all-important core muscles and practising some of the breathing techniques.

• **Pregnancy-tailored exercise classes** – Prenatal fitness groups are usually filled with upbeat moms-to-be, which is fitting not only for exercising, but for

forming support networks too (for example www.preggibellies.co.za).

• **Squatting and toning the inner thigh muscles** – These muscles are key to supporting facilitative labour and birthing positions. They need to be toned as they are often neglected in our sedentary modern lifestyles. Try the "leaping frog" position or thigh movements against resistance.

• **Pelvic rock** – This exercise strengthens tummy and back muscles – which are key to birthing – and facilitates better blood flow to the lower body. Get on all fours with your hands directly under your shoulders and knees under your hips. Start with a flat back and then tuck your bum in, moving slowly and squeezing in your stomach muscles. Return to a flat back position and repeat 25 times, twice a day.

• **Pelvic floor (kegel) exercises** – These are the same muscles that are used to stop the flow of urine and are vital for birthing and continence. To tone them squeeze, hold and release them at least 50 times a day, aiming for longer and longer hold-ability as you progress.

POSSIBLE BENEFITS OF EXERCISE FOR MOMS-TO-BE & BABY:

- Increases energy, stamina and muscle control for an easier pregnancy and a faster, more comfortable birth.
- Prevents stress, hypertension and preeclampsia (through improved calcium absorption), as well as water retention, excessive weight gain and pregnancy-induced diabetes.

- Maintains strength and postural alignment, thus reducing the effects of biomechanical changes to your body.

- Improves confidence and capability, and reduces depression.

In short, an active lifestyle during pregnancy vastly supports the ability to give birth naturally. And natural birth has countless benefits to the physical and emotional health and wellbeing of mom and baby, including quicker recovery, and easier bonding, connecting and breastfeeding. It will also leave you feeling like superwoman.

With proper preparation you can confidently star in this life-transforming event, which offers the ultimate prize that we covet above all – sleepless nights and dirty nappies.

"Before I had children I always wondered whether their births would be, for me, like the ultimate in gym class failures. And I discovered instead ... that I'd finally found my sport." – Joyce Maynard

A few safety tips:

- **Listen to your body** and take your current state of fitness into consideration.

If you are a seasoned athlete then, depending on the exercise, you can continue your routine with modifications as pregnancy progresses.

If you're a beginner, start slowly and increase gradually. If you experience discomfort, stop exercising.

- **Inform your trainer that you're pregnant** so that exercises can be suitably modified where required.

• **Warm up slowly** and do not over-stretch as a hormone called relaxin loosens ligaments in preparation for birth.

- **Follow a nutritious, well-balanced diet** and drink plenty of water to avoid overheating.



Chanel Schoeman is an internationally certified childbirth educator affiliated with the HypnoBirthing® Institute. She presents effective, natural birth-oriented antenatal classes in Centurion, Pretoria. For more information visit www.infantree.co.za.



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