

Prenatal fitness

Amazing benefits for mother — and child

BY AMY GRIFFITH

Exercise during pregnancy is not only imperative to keep a mom-to-be fit and healthy, but it can also benefit the child's lifelong health. This is according to recent research from the University of Virginia School of Medicine, which determined that exercise during pregnancy has a distinct molecular consequence on the unborn child that essentially allows the child to be more fit. Other studies have shown that maintaining a healthy weight during pregnancy is tied to preventing childhood obesity, which has reached epidemic proportions in the U.S. Of course, prenatal fitness is also an imperative for the budding mom's own health with respect to both her physical and emotional well-being.

That said, while most understand that maintaining a pregnancy fitness regimen is beneficial, many women harbor erroneous fears and misconceptions about prenatal exercise or simply don't know the best way to go about integrating fitness into their daily lifestyles, both of which undermine and inhibit a pregnant woman's opportunity to optimize her health and fully enjoy the experience.

To help moms-to-be (with no applicable medical complications) gain expert-based knowledge and innate

confidence relating to their fitness choices, below prenatal lifestyle expert, Amy Griffith, star of her own "Active Prenatal Yoga" Workout DVD, offers eight tips and truths to give direction, debunk myths, and provide overall peace-of-mind to foster a fit, healthy and happy nine months:

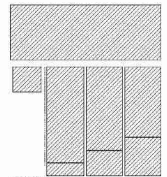
• **Start now.** If a woman becomes pregnant and has not had a structured fitness routine beforehand, she can certainly start now — and should — since exercise develops muscle tone, can help prevent gestational diabetes, aids in digestion and can help regulate blood pressure. Just be sure to begin with some gentle forms of exercise. As the due date approaches, remaining active can also encourage the baby to move into proper position for birth. Even activity as simple as walking is hugely beneficial to a pregnant woman. She can even run, bike, dance, and strength train as long as it still feels safe for her body. Whatever modality of exercise she decides to engage in, it is always of utmost importance that she listen to her body and recognize individual limitations.

• **Exercise to release endorphins.** Exercise not only has countless physical benefits with keeping muscles toned, maintaining healthy body fat levels, and improving cardiovascular health among them, but it also releases endorphins that can

help boost mood, improve self-esteem, reduce anxiety and depression, decrease stress, alleviate pain, and improve sleep. All of these can greatly enhance the lifestyle of a pregnant woman, helping her enjoy the overall experience.

• **Yes, "do abs."** Pregnant women still have them and will benefit from strengthening them in advance of delivery. Exercising abs and the entire core group of muscles will help prevent back and posture problems caused by the growing stomach, will make pushing more effective pushing during labor, and will help the new mother recover quicker. For example, a pregnant mother in her second and third trimester will mainly be working her transverse abdominus, which wrap from front to back like a corset, and also the obliques. Keeping these muscles toned and active will help them to return to their pre-pregnancy state far sooner. Abdominal exercises during pregnancy can also reduce the risk of abdominal separation, which can lead to other physical ailments. Beforehand, be sure to research the safest types of abdominal exercise for the various trimesters and execute with proper form.

• **Try yoga:** Yoga is not just about gaining strength and flexibility, and finding calm in moments of stress; it also helps slow down our busy



lives. Prenatal yoga is a very safe form of exercise. Executed with the use of props to support the pregnant woman as baby grows, the mother can maintain the standard yoga poses but in a modified way. Prenatal yoga also teaches the powerful connection of breath and movement, encouraging the woman to let go of tension trigger points in her body. All of these elements combine to cultivate a deeper understanding of how the woman's body moves, and what she can do to relax in an uncomfortable situation, both physically and mentally. Many of the elements of a prenatal yoga class can be utilized by the mother as she moves through labor and delivery, including poses to ease labor pains, breathing techniques, and meditation.

• **Cardiovascular exercise is a-ok.**

The old theory of not allowing your heart rate to exceed 140 beats per minute is no longer supported by the medical community. There is about a 50 percent increase in blood flow when a woman is pregnant, so the heart works much harder to deliver all of these nutrients throughout the body and especially the placenta. While a pregnant woman who is exercising may tire out more quickly, there is no evidence that such exertion is harmful to her baby. The general rule of thumb is if a pregnant woman can continue to carry on a conversation while performing an exercise routine, then she is in a cardiovascular safe zone.

• **Set a fitness mantra.** A mantra is a positive intention — word or phrase that you come back to daily to “check in” and be reminded that everything is okay and on course. Setting a mantra will help you to trust your body, and accept the changes that are occurring physically. It can help to quiet down the ego and encourage you to slow down and even accept the temporary fitness limitations. This is a key lesson to reiterate throughout pregnancy and can help to keep the pregnant woman safe while exercising. Some mantras are, “I accept,” “I trust,” and “I am strong.” These positive reminders carry throughout the pregnancy and the birth of the baby.

• **Massage to recover faster.** A carefully delivered massage from a prenatal massage specialist can allevi-

ate pain in various parts of the body that can be caused by too much physical activity — exercise and otherwise. Massage stretches and loosens muscles that become tight as baby grows and the as the woman's body changes. Massage will also benefit the pregnant woman as it relieves tension. A pregnant woman's low back pain, headaches, sciatica, and swelling can all be eased by a trained massage therapist. When her body feels better, she is able to continue to keep herself healthy with regular exercise.

• **Meditate to de-stress.** Meditating can connect to a mantra you set or simply help to quiet down, clear your mind, calm your nervous system, and regulate your blood pressure. When employed in combination with a fitness regime, a pregnant woman can reap the rewards of both physical and emotional health. Pregnant women can quiet down fears and release them through the practice of meditation. When the mother lets go of fear, it opens her up to having a positive pregnancy and birth. Labor and delivery are certainly a physical experience, but many women say it is 90 percent mental. Allowing oneself to move inward and “step out of your own way” gives the body permission to do exactly what it knows how to do: birth baby! Meditation enables the mom-to-be to mentally surrender while exercise gives her physical strength and confidence.

Nationally certified prenatal yoga instructor Amy Griffith is one of America's leading prenatal fitness and lifestyle experts, providing free advice, including eBook and video content, to her army of followers and fans at www.AmyGriffith-workout.com. The above should not be construed as medical advice. Individuals should consult with their own physicians before starting any fitness or exercise regime.

