

# Shaping up while pregnant

**Fitness consultant Amanda Hargreaves discusses how regular exercise can combat some of the common ailments of pregnancy.**

I have always been relatively fit and healthy thanks to a good diet and regular exercise. So when I became pregnant I saw no problem in continuing with this way of living throughout my pregnancy. As a consequence, I encountered very few of the common complaints associated with pregnancy: I did not have any back pain, my swelling was well under control, I returned to my normal body shape within a few weeks and suffered no postpartum depression. While many people would attribute this pregnancy from heaven as 'lucky' or 'having great genes', I truly believe that my lifestyle was the determining factor. I have since worked with many clients who have experienced the same results.

Even with today's excellent facilities, the state of the nation's fitness is worsening. As a result, women today are far less prepared physically for the rigors of pregnancy. A woman's weight increases during pregnancy, along with an increase in ligament flexibility and an altered centre of gravity. This induces changes in the biomechanical activation of all the main stabiliser muscles, especially the erector spinae muscles, and leads to greater mechanical loading in a totally unaccustomed manner. When these muscles tire they enter a state of spasm, which renders them incapable of carrying out their role as stabilisers effectively. It has been demonstrated that regular training of this area to enhance both the strength and endurance of these muscles has a positive effect on low back pain (Garshasbi et al, 2005).

Our ancestors, who had no choice but to be physically fit and adhere to a healthier selection of food, would have been able to deal with increased body mass with more ease and less discomfort. I'm hardly in favour of a return to a pre-industrialised society, especially considering the other many dangers that women faced back then during pregnancy without the aid of modern medicine. However, I believe that it would make sense to deliver exercise programmes that, thanks to our knowledge today of the human body, would be of

tremendous benefit.

I have developed an approach to pre- and postnatal exercise. One of the most common

complaints I hear is the fact that women find it hard to get their body shape back after the birth and have quite often accumulated fat deposits, which prove hard to remove. Research has proven that lifestyle counselling that incorporates advice on nutrition and exercise has a positive effect on preventing excessive weight gain (Polley et al, 2002; Asbee et al, 2009).

Before embarking on an exercise regime, I always insist on a thorough medical examination and that they keep their midwife, GP and/or obstetrician informed at all times. Other general points are:

- \* Never exercise to fatigue
- \* Always exercise in an area where you are safe and free from clutter
- \* Do not exercise in areas that are excessively hot
- \* Take plenty of rest between exercises and exercise sessions
- \* Drink plenty of water
- \* Start slowly and increase exercise gradually
- \* Contact your doctor if you experience any unusual symptoms.

I do not advocate stretching, this is confusing to some women as they have often seen articles or training routines that incorporate a lot of flexibility exercises. Due to the connective tissue loosening as a result of oestrogen, progesterone, and relaxin, the risk of ligament strain in the joints is increased, particularly in the sacro-iliac and hip joints.

The benefits of a healthier lifestyle during pregnancy also enhance the chances of a healthier child. If exercise is taken up during pregnancy and carried on as a lifestyle from that point on, the child will benefit as they grow older, as they tend to mimic the habits of their parents. **M**

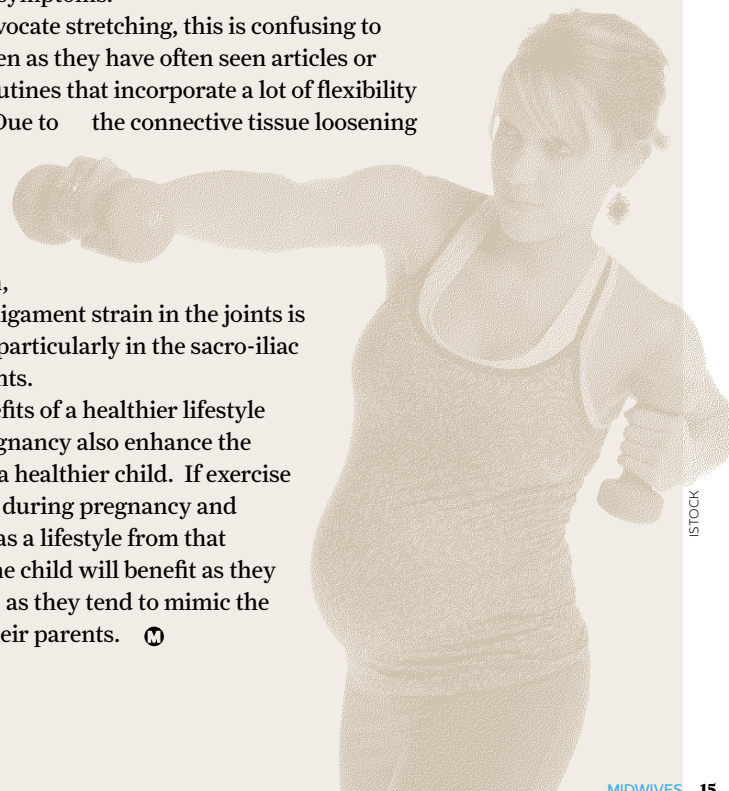
## References

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\* A review of Amanda's DVD *Preexercise* can be found on page 44.



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