



Health Care Providers:

Talk to Your Patients About Physical Activity During and After Pregnancy

You know it's important to help your pregnant and postpartum patients get physical activity. But it can be challenging to talk about activity in the short time you have for pre- and post-natal visits.

The second edition of the Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans can help! The Guidelines includes evidence-based physical activity guidance for pregnant and postpartum women — guidance that many maternal health organizations, including the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, cite and promote in their own materials. Share the recommendations from the Guidelines and inspire your patients to get active.

Start the conversation.

Patients who were active before pregnancy might be eager to ask you about physical activity. But with patients who haven't been active before, you may need to be more proactive about raising this topic. Try these quick conversation starters.

How much activity do you get now — and how much did you get before pregnancy?

Meet your patients where they are. Once you have an idea of their current and previous activity levels, you can suggest small changes to help them get active — or get back to their normal routine after pregnancy.

Do you have any concerns about being active?

Your patients may get conflicting advice about what's safe during and after pregnancy. Tell them that being active is safe and healthy. Physical activity can even lower their risk for some complications during pregnancy

Does activity ever feel uncomfortable or painful?

It's normal for activity to feel different during or just after pregnancy. But check in with your patients about any pain they're feeling and make a plan to address it. Pain could be a sign of a health problem — or it may mean they need to switch to gentler activities.



Recommend the right dose of activity.

You can tailor these recommendations to match your patients' specific needs, interests, health conditions, and abilities.

Just like all adults, pregnant and postpartum women need:

Moderate-intensity aerobic activity

Anything that gets their heart beating faster counts.



AND

Muscle-strengthening activity

Activities that make their muscles work harder than usual count.



If 150 minutes seems like too much — or your patients weren't active at all before — encourage them to start with just 5 minutes. Even that amount has real health benefits, and they can work up to 150 at their own pace.

And if your patients did more vigorous activities before pregnancy (like running), it's fine for them to continue. Just keep checking in about their routine during visits, and remind them to stop or scale back if an activity feels like too much.

Seize the opportunity for behavior change.

Research shows that patients may be more willing to make health behavior changes during pregnancy — like eating healthier and being more active. So make the most of this opportunity by making physical activity a priority during prenatal visits.



Focus on the benefits.

The long-term benefits of physical activity are huge, but patients have heard them all before. Sharing immediate benefits that patients may not know about can help spark their interest.

Physical activity can make daily life better. Getting active can:

- Improve mood, focus, and sleep
- Help patients feel more energized, calm, and confident
- Make it easier for them to do everyday activities, like carrying groceries and playing with kids

Physical activity during pregnancy has even more benefits.

Getting active can:

- Help make labor shorter and recovery easier
- Help patients keep their weight in a healthy range during and after pregnancy
- Lower the risk of gestational diabetes, preeclampsia, and postpartum depression

So tell your patients that being active has big health benefits for them **and** for their baby.



Talk about activity with every patient.

Physical activity is important for all pregnant and postpartum women, and the benefits go way beyond weight and body mass index (BMI). So break out of the BMI box and make activity a key recommendation for all your patients — even when weight isn't a concern.



Emphasize safety.

Pregnant patients may worry that activity could harm their baby — but the evidence is clear: being active during pregnancy is safe and healthy for most women. Activity does not raise the risk of miscarriage or preterm labor. In fact, it can help them have a healthier pregnancy.

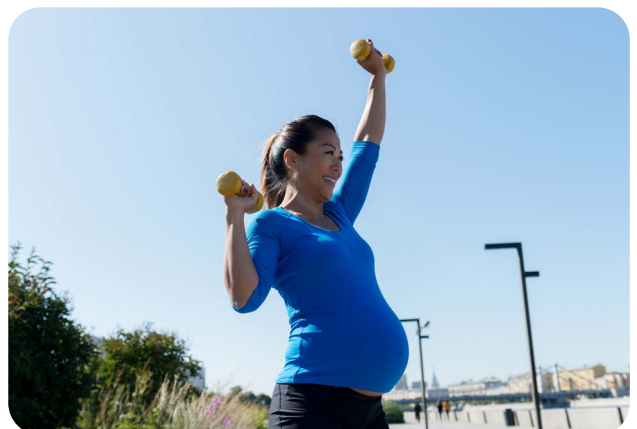
But remind pregnant patients to avoid:

- Contact sports and any other activities where they could fall down or get hit in the belly
- Lying flat on their back during physical activity (after the first trimester)

What about lifting weights?

If your patients were lifting weights before pregnancy, it's safe for them to continue while they're pregnant. And it's fine to start lifting weights again after pregnancy, when they feel ready. Just tell your patients to listen to their bodies — and stop if it feels like too much.

You can also encourage patients to try resistance bands as a gentler option.



Be ready to address barriers.

Making time for regular physical activity can be hard — especially during or after pregnancy. Find out what's holding your patients back and talk about possible solutions.

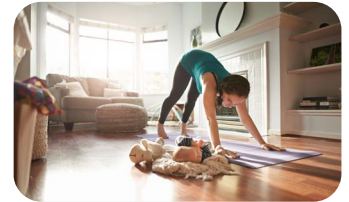
“I’m just too busy for physical activity.”

Lots of things count as physical activity — even things we all have to do anyway. Do they vacuum their apartment? Walk the dog? Go grocery shopping? Those activities all count. And if patients are busy caring for a new baby, suggest activities they can do at home with their baby in a carrier — like dancing or walking around while they’re on the phone.



“I’m too tired to exercise.”

Both pregnancy and taking care of a new baby can be exhausting. But getting more physical activity can actually help your patients feel less tired. Encourage manageable changes to daily routines — and remind your patients that it’s okay to take it slow and easy. They can add a little more activity each day.



“It’s hard to stay motivated.”

Being active can be more fun with other people — and when it’s fun, it’s easier to stick with it. Encourage your patients to invite friends or family to join them for a walk. They can also look into parent-and-baby activity classes or new parent groups at local rec centers.



“I’m worried that activity might harm my baby.”

Ask your patients about their concerns. Then reassure them that activity does **not** raise the risk of miscarriage or preterm labor — and can actually help them have a healthier pregnancy. If they’re still worried, encourage them to try gentler activities, like walking or swimming.



Find resources for your patients.

This fact sheet is just for providers, but the Move Your Way campaign has lots of tools and materials you can share with patients:

- Fact sheets for pregnant and postpartum women: health.gov/physical-activity/move-your-way-campaign/maternal-health#factsheets
- Activity planner to set personalized activity goals: <https://health.gov/moveyourway/activity-planner>

And you can display these posters [health.gov/physical-activity/move-your-way-campaign/maternal-health#posters] in your office so patients get the message about physical activity every time they visit.



Office of
Disease Prevention
and Health Promotion

December 2020