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By Elizabeth Heubeck

Super-Fit Moms-to-Be: Should You Slow Down During Pregnancy?



of experts are urging fit pregnant women to tune in to something far more nuanced than ACOG's 1985 guideline cautioning pregnant women not to exceed a maximum heart rate of 140 beats per minute.

"While a lot of [experts] are saying it's good to have a heart rate monitor, they're also saying that more important is perceived exertion, meaning how you're feeling—your ability to breathe, your core temperature, and how your muscles feel," says Tamara Pitard, a group fitness instructor at Lynne Brick's exercise facility at Belvedere Square, who exercised throughout her two pregnancies.

Though Pitard encourages her pregnant students to continue taking her classes as long as they're comfortable doing so, she also advises them to make special preparations and take certain precautions, such

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Some women revel in the physical changes that come with pregnancy. They love the way their body morphs into a more curvaceous shape and the slowed pace at which they have to move, particularly toward the end of their term.

Then there are women who don't want any of it. They don't enjoy the gradual rounding of their bodies, and they sure as heck don't want to slow down.

Does this second scenario sound like you?

If so, chances are you're an athlete or an otherwise extremely fit woman, accustomed to exercising at high rates of intensity for long periods of time. And you're probably wondering how pregnancy will affect your ability to exercise.

While there's no one-size-fits-all answer to this question, certain universal guidelines do apply. Assuming you have no contraindications—something every pregnant woman should discuss with her doctor or midwife before engaging in physical activity—the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecologists (ACOG) recommends 30 minutes or more of moderate exercise on most days of the week during pregnancy. The catch is that "moderate" can mean something very different from one woman to the next.

No hard and fast exercise guidelines exist that speak to the pregnant athlete, but an increasing number

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as drinking about twice the amount of water during class as they normally would to stay hydrated.

Other experts offer similar advice.

"I tell my clients: 'Listen to your body. If it feels okay, there's no reason to stop. If it doesn't feel good, adjust what you're doing,'" says Alexis Mulava, a seasoned personal trainer at Brick Bodies at Padonia.

But Mulava warns that even elite

athletes should avoid exercising to the point of exhaustion during pregnancy. Intense exercise raises the body's core temperature, and research suggests that it can also cause the fetus' temperature to escalate, which could lead to complications or an increased risk of birth defects.

That sounds scary, doesn't it? Even scarier, however, is that, for some women, knowing the potential harm that could result from excessive exercise during pregnancy is not enough to stop them from pushing beyond safe limits.

Dr. Steven Crawford, associate director of The Center for Eating

Disorders at Sheppard Pratt in Baltimore, points to societal pressure and a woman's desire to conform to it as a major culprit in encouraging this unsafe behavior.

"Unfortunately, our society is so focused on images of thin celebrities postpartum," he says.

Crawford offers a practical suggestion to women who have trouble dealing with the physical changes that come with

pregnancy.

"The more women can focus on the outcome of the pregnancy, the more they can tolerate, accept, and even appreciate these changes to their body," he says.

It also helps to remember that pregnancy and the changes it requires are only temporary. "Be patient and give yourself the opportunity to let your body go through the process," Mulava says. "Accept it." **BC**