

The benefits of sport for the pregnant woman

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Most of the recent debate about sports and pregnancy has focussed on the perceived 'dangers' of participation, with little consideration of the benefits to women of continued participation in sport during pregnancy.

While the social, economic and health benefits of sports participation are profound, population participation rates are low. This is particularly true for organised sport, in which participation rates are lower for women than for men, and decrease markedly with age. Data from the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health indicate that participation rates fall most markedly during the life stage at which women experience childbirth and motherhood. In terms of population social, economic and health benefits, it might therefore be valuable to encourage women to continue to play sport during their childbearing years, in order to prevent the decline in participation at this life stage.

The question at the centre of the current debate is whether it is safe for women to continue to participate in sport during pregnancy, and indeed to assess whether the benefits of continuing to play outweigh the potential risks. During the last twenty years there has been a marked shift in attitudes towards this issue. On balance, the available evidence now suggests that healthy pregnant women (with normal pregnancies) can begin or maintain a regular exercise program or sports participation without affecting the course or outcome of the pregnancy. There are of course provisos in terms of the type, intensity, duration and frequency of exercise, but participation in appropriate sports at a level which complies with current guidelines is, on balance, likely to have more beneficial than adverse effects.

This paper will outline the evidence relating to the *benefits* of participation for pregnant women, in terms of maternal weight gain, maternal fitness, gestational diabetes, and the effects of exercise on gestational age, labour and birthweight. Controlling weight gain and maintaining fitness during pregnancy are likely to be important determinants of continued participation after pregnancy. This is important as recent data suggest that participation in organised sport is declining, and one of the aims of the new Federal sport policy is to promote 'greater participation in sports for all ages.' Banning women from playing sport during pregnancy will not help to achieve this goal.