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## Listen to Your Heart

### Have a Heart-healthy Pregnancy

By Lisa A. Goldstein

Health conscious most of her adult life, Deborah Springer of Kernersville, N.C., is even more so due to her job as a cardiology nurse at Wake Forest University Baptist Medical Center. "I have had a patient over the past year – 36 [years old] with three children – who developed pregnancy-induced cardiomyopathy," she says. "It is tragic."

As a result, Springer, who is pregnant with her fifth child, is the perfect example of someone who not only pays attention to her heart during pregnancy, but lives that lifestyle all the time. She eats a healthy diet and keeps up with most of her pre-pregnancy exercise routine.

All this is important because the No. 1 killer of women is heart disease. "Women need to take care of their hearts starting at an early age, and pregnancy should not interfere with a heart-healthy lifestyle," says Dr. Matthew S. DeVane, author of [Heart Smart: A Cardiologist's 5 Step Plan for Detecting, Preventing and Even Reversing Heart Disease](#)

(Wiley and Sons, 2006). "Women with risk factors for heart disease (hypertension, diabetes, smoking, high cholesterol, family history of heart disease, overweight, sedentary lifestyles) should be especially diligent with being good to [their hearts] during and after pregnancy. The risks don't go away with pregnancy and should not be ignored. In fact, women with risk factors should be extra careful to stay heart healthy during pregnancy because of the common habits of eating poorly, gaining [more than the recommended amount of] weight and lack of exercise that comes with pregnancy. Smoking and alcohol, of course, are absolute no-no's for the heart and the baby at all points in and around pregnancy."

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The short-term benefits of being heart healthy include getting the heart into shape to help deal with the natural changes that occur with pregnancy, according to Dr. DeVane. Eating a healthy, well-balanced, heart-healthy diet combined with a light- to moderate-intensity regular exercise routine goes a long way in making the pregnancy a happy and healthy experience, he says. "The heart is placed under increased demands to deliver blood, oxygen and vital nutrients to both the mother and baby, so a strong, healthy heart is vital both for the baby and for Mom," he says.

In addition, Dr. DeVane says starting such a healthy routine prior to pregnancy will help the mother carry these habits over into the post-delivery stages where extra weight, the challenges of being a mom to a newborn and time constraints make starting a new exercise program difficult.

Some conditions diagnosed during pregnancy may actually be associated with heart disease at menopause, says Dr. Nieca Goldberg, spokesperson for the American Heart Association and author of Women Are Not Small Men: Life-Saving Strategies for Preventing and Healing Heart Disease in Women (Random House, 2003). Preeclampsia, which occurs during pregnancy and is characterized by high blood pressure, leg swelling and protein in the urine, can increase risk of heart disease twofold after age 50, Dr. Goldberg says. "The best advice is that even after you're pregnant, you need to follow up with your doctor to have your blood pressure, cholesterol and other risk factors checked," she says.

Hypertension in pregnancy is also dangerous, but Dr. Goldberg says it can be treated with medications that are safe. Blood pressure needs to be monitored, however. Gestational diabetes during pregnancy increases the risk for type II diabetes, which increases a woman's risk for heart disease fivefold, Dr. Goldberg says. And diet and exercise play a large role in the prevention of type II diabetes, according to Dr. Goldberg.

Oral hygiene also is important to heart health. "Periodontal disease is directly related to heart disease and has a gestational effect on the baby by increasing the risk of low-birth-weight babies, pre-term deliveries and more," says Dr. Stephen D. Spitz of Smileboston Cosmetic and Implant Dentistry in Boston, Mass. The major factor is the unjustified fear that a woman should not go to the dentist during pregnancy, but in actuality, it's more important to see the dentist as soon as possible for hygiene, periodontal care and any other pain, he says.

### **Diet and Exercise**

Pregnant women need to consume a healthy balanced diet that includes fruits, vegetables and whole grains. Although fish is recommended as a heart-healthy food source, pregnant women need to watch their intake of certain types of fish because of mercury content, says Dr. Goldberg, who also recommends nuts such as almonds and walnuts as good sources of healthy fats (monounsaturated, polyunsaturated and omegas).

"[Women] should have no more than two servings [of fish] per week and avoid fish with high mercury content like tuna, swordfish and mackerel," says Dr. Goldberg. "For those eating chicken, we recommend removing the skin, and it should be baked or grilled. Deep frying not only adds calories but saturated fat."

In terms of exercise, regular, light-to-moderate-intensity exercise for 30 minutes for five or more days a week is recommended by the American Heart Association and is also recommended for pregnant

mothers, with some exceptions. "Moms who did not exercise regularly before pregnancy should take special care to start a regimen for her health and start slowly and work her way up to 30 minutes a day," says Dr. DeVane. "Women with pregnancy-induced hypertension, vaginal bleeding, known coronary heart disease, preterm labor and other conditions should seek the advice of their doctor before exercising."

Exercise intensity may need to be reduced because pulse rates are higher during pregnancy. Avoid vigorous exercises, particularly those involving high-impact movement like jumping up and down, says Dr. Goldberg.

Mom may have to back off the exercise during the late third trimester, says Dr. DeVane. She should listen to her body. After the fifth month of pregnancy, Springer was walking instead of jogging and limited her weight training and Pilates to pregnancy-safe levels. After the seventh month, she was fairly tired and became short of breath with exertion, yet she walked daily. Low-impact walking, swimming, water aerobics and yoga can be continued throughout pregnancy.

Pregnant women should take advantage of this time and set the stage for healthy habits that will last a lifetime. "With the growing epidemic of childhood obesity and coronary heart disease being found in teenagers, the mom can change the legacy and fate of her entire family by adopting and implementing heart-healthy eating and exercise into her family from day one," says Dr. DeVane.


### Listen to Your Heart

For some women, being good to their hearts while pregnant may mean changing their normal pre-pregnancy exercise routine, but it depends on what that routine was. If the lifestyle was already heart healthy, she may not have to change much at all, says Dr. Matthew S. DeVane.

One thing pregnant women will need to think about that they didn't before is heart rate. Dr. DeVane says to use the formula  $220 - \text{age} = \text{maximum heart rate}$ . Pregnant women should do low-impact exercise at 50 to 60 percent of maximum heart rate as a general rule, he says. "They should listen to their body and stop sooner if they are not sure or are really out of shape," says Dr. DeVane.

### Want to see more?

- [The Active Route: Taking Charge of Your Heart Health](#)
- [Heart-healthy Eating: It's Easier Than You Think](#)
- [Soup's On!: A Soothing Comfort Food for Moms-to-be](#)
- [Talk about it!](#)

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