

Exercise interventions during, after pregnancy offer health benefits

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Exercise interventions during and after pregnancy offer numerous health benefits to both mothers and their babies, particularly among women who are at high risk for gestational diabetes and preeclampsia. Danielle Downs, an associate professor of kinesiology and obstetrics and gynecology at Penn State, was one of four speakers invited to discuss their studies related to pregnancy and postpartum interventions at a symposium during the 2011 Annual Meeting and Scientific Session of the Society of Behavioral Medicine (SBM), held in April in Washington, D.C.

"With the increased focus on the [obesity epidemic](#) in this country and the growing evidence to support the effects of maternal [lifestyle factors](#) on fetal programming, this is a critical time to understand the role of physical activity in promoting both immediate and lifelong maternal and [infant health](#)," said Downs.

During the symposium, Downs discussed the determinants and outcomes of physical activity in pregnancy and presented findings from her study "Active MOMS: A Randomized Physical Activity Intervention for Pregnant Women." In the study, Downs randomly assigned pregnant women with and without [gestational diabetes](#) to one of three groups: those who participated in semi-intensive, structured exercise in which they underwent twice-weekly exercise sessions on campus with a trained prenatal fitness instructor and nurse; those who participated in minimum-contact, lifestyle physical activity, in which they were encouraged to meet [physical activity guidelines](#) on their own but were not presented

with one-on-one exercise sessions; and those who participated in a standard-of-care control group, in which they were simply given basic information about prenatal health care.

Preliminary findings from the study showed that the women who participated in the structured exercise had greater overall exercise participation and stronger motivational influences for exercise (better attitude, stronger perceived control, more social support from friends and family) than the women in the other groups. The women in the structured group also had better body image, lower gestational weight gain and lower depressive symptoms compared to women in the other groups. Also, no differences across the groups were observed for infant birth weight or length, suggesting that the exercise interventions did not have a negative impact on these infant outcomes.

"These findings suggest that an exercise intervention, delivered with a semi-intensive, structured approach, can positively impact pregnant women's physical activity behaviors and motivational determinants, as well as provide health benefits," said Downs.

The Society of Behavioral Medicine is a multidisciplinary organization of clinicians, educators, and scientists dedicated to promoting the study of the interactions of behavior with biology and the environment and the application of that knowledge to improve the health and well being of individuals, families, communities, and populations.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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