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Physiology of Prenatal Exercise and Fetal Development



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ISSN 2192-9866
ISBN 978-1-4614-3407-8
DOI 10.1007/978-1-4614-3408-5
Springer New York Heidelberg Dordrecht London

e-ISSN 2192-9874
e-ISBN 978-1-4614-3408-5

Library of Congress Control Number: 2012933847

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Printed on acid-free paper

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Preface

In the quest to provide children with optimal health, maternal exercise while in utero is sometimes not considered. Concerns have been raised that the physiologic effects of maternal exercise on thermal equilibrium, placental bed blood flow, and delivery of oxygen and nutrients to the fetus may compromise the growth and development of the fetus. However, collective findings have supported that acute cardiovascular, hormonal, nutritional, thermoregulatory, and biomechanical responses of exercise are not teratogenic, and do not compromise the pregnancy. Moreover, results of further studies revealed that physical exercise provides benefits for expectant mothers, such as an improved sense of well-being, diminished discomfort and pain associated with pregnancy, and maintenance of maternal cardiovascular health. Exercise during pregnancy also maintains and/or improves maternal fitness and physical capacity, significantly decreases risk of developing preeclampsia, hypertension, gestational diabetes mellitus, decreases weight gain, and improves attitude and mental state (Collings, Curet et al. 1983; Dye, Knox et al. 1997; Clapp, Kim et al. 2000; Pivarnik 2006). Placental adaptations have been discovered that indicate an increase in blood flow and nourishment to the fetus. Mothers who are well-conditioned and continue their exercise regimen throughout gestation show no increase in lack of conception, abortion, congenital abnormalities, or preterm labor, and have normal growth and development during the first year of life (Clapp 1991, 1998).

In light of the information that maternal exercise is not harmful to the fetus, while also being beneficial to mother and the placenta, our research has begun to examine pregnancy outcomes as they are related to exercise benefits of the fetus/infant. Throughout the [Chap. 1](#) we will describe current findings of how maternal exercise throughout gestation influences fetal development of key organ systems. The [Chap. 2](#) will explain how these effects influence the offspring during labor and delivery. This chapter will also examine the relationship between maternal activity level and perinatal cardiac autonomic control of the offspring. [Chapter 3](#) will describe the longitudinal effect of maternal exercise on postnatal growth. These chapters will encompass the relationship between maternal activity level and fetal, birth, and neonatal effects.