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VITAL SIGNS

Having a Baby: Exercise May Reduce Need for an Epidural

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In addition to its other well-known benefits, exercise during pregnancy may help women reduce the need for anesthesia when they give birth, a small study has found.

Researchers assigned 34 pregnant women to a water aerobics exercise program three times a week, 50 minutes a session, and 37 to a sedentary control group matched for age, weight, education, previous births and body mass before pregnancy. Women in both groups were healthy and in good physical condition, and fitness as measured by oxygen consumption and cardiac output was higher in both groups in the second trimester, returning to pre-pregnancy levels during the third. The study appears in the Nov. 21 issue of *Reproductive Health*.

There was no difference between the two groups in length of labor, type of delivery or health of the newborn, and the program showed no effect on the cardiovascular capacity of the women. But only 27 percent of the exercisers, compared with 65 percent of the controls, requested pain medication during labor.

“This study points to a small advantage regarding the need for epidural anesthesia,” said the lead author, Rosa I. Pereira of the University of Campinas in Brazil. “Healthy women with a low-risk pregnancy should practice regular moderate physical exercise during pregnancy.”