

At this time of year – with presents to buy, parties to throw, and deadlines to meet – it can be hard to wind down. But, if you're pregnant, it's essential

# Relax for your baby's sake

**T**ake a deep breath, sit down and put your feet up for a minute. No, don't leap up to defrost the fridge or Hoover the skirting boards. Read on, because your hectic, stressful lifestyle may be having a negative effect on your unborn baby.

Research by a top London teaching hospital, Queen Charlotte's, has shown two ways that stress can affect your unborn baby. First, the mother's stress hormone – cortisol – can cross the placenta, and second, cortisol can reduce blood flow to the placenta.

Maternal stress has already been linked to low birth weight and prematurity, but a number of small-scale studies now suggest stress in pregnancy may also lead to long-term behavioural problems in children, such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

Professor Vivette Glover, of Queen Charlotte's Fetal and Neonatal Stress Research Centre, is conducting a study of up to 10,000 women to test this suggestion. When the research is published, it could show the mother's stress permanently affects the baby's stress-control mechanism, leading to long-term problems. We'll tell you more when the results come out. Meanwhile, for your baby's sake, chill out!

## De-stress your life

### Sleep

Your body is working hard now and needs plenty of sleep. Get into the habit of going to bed early. As you get bigger, if you're uncomfortable, try popping a pillow under your bump and another one between your legs.

### Eat well

Small, frequent healthy meals will keep you full of energy and help you feel more comfortable, especially in the later stages of pregnancy. Make sure you always include iron-rich foods in your diet such as dark green leafy vegetables, as pregnant women are prone to anaemia, causing fatigue and, consequently, stress. And don't smoke or drink alcohol.

### Breathing

Put aside time each day to practice breathing exercises. Unplug the phone, dim the lights, close your eyes and focus on a deep inhalation followed by a long exhalation.

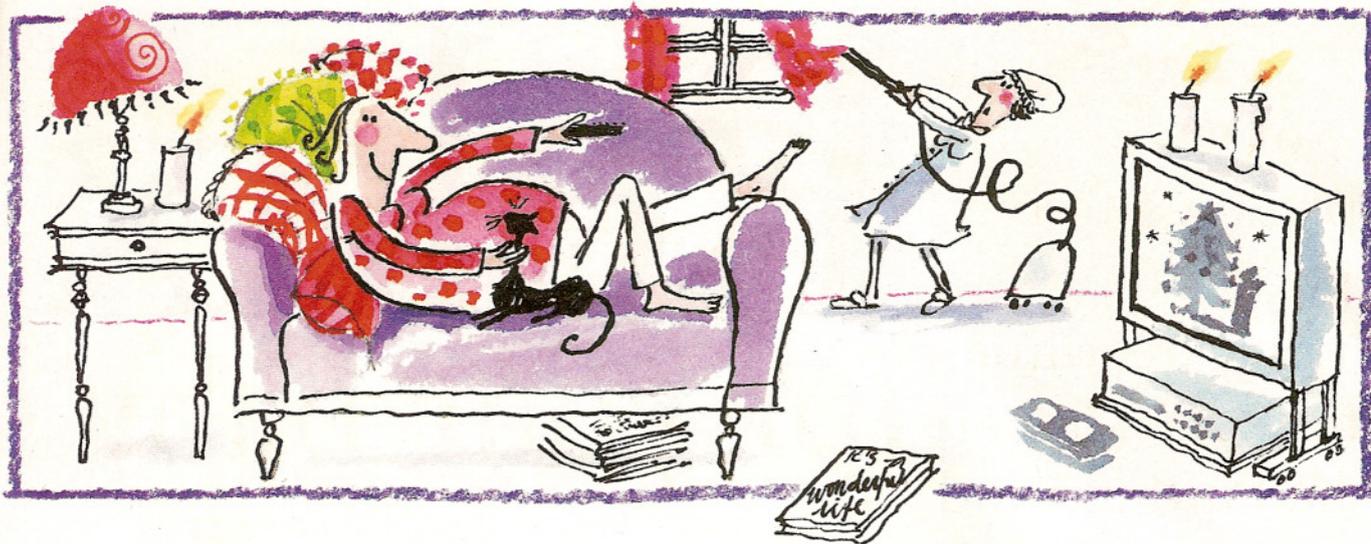
### Exercise

This triggers the release of endorphins, which induce a sense of happiness as you're exercising, and a feeling of deep relaxation after you have finished. There's no need to do anything too strenuous – try walking or swimming, or join an antenatal exercise class.

### Yoga

Yoga is good for both your body and your mind, and the breathing exercises can help you when you're in labour. The Active Birth Centre (log on at [www.activebirthcentre.com](http://www.activebirthcentre.com) or call 020 7482 5554) can supply you with a list of teachers near you who specialise in antenatal yoga. It also stocks *Yoga For Pregnancy* by Janet Balaskas (£12.95 plus postage and packing) – a 32-page booklet with an accompanying ▶





audio tape and wall chart to talk you through the breathing, awareness and relaxation exercises.

### Aromatherapy

Invest in some aromatherapy oils that are safe to use in pregnancy, and charm your partner into giving you a massage. The Active Birth Centre stocks Pregnancy Massage Oil (£12.95 plus p&p for 100ml).

### Home shopping

Use catalogues or the internet for Christmas shopping and avoid crowded shops. (Find out the best ways to shop from your sofa with our guide on p55.)

### Get help

If you can afford it, get a cleaner. It will mean more time for you to relax and put your feet up in front of the television.

### Lean on me

Friends and family can be your greatest stress-busters. If you're feeling down or a bit stressed, invite a couple of friends around for a chat and a gossip over tea and chocolate digestives.

## Wind down at work

Here's a few suggestions for a calmer, less stressed working life.

- Keep a supply of nutritious, healthy snacks on your desk so your blood sugar level doesn't plummet. Try dried

apricots, sunflower seeds, rice cakes or fruit. Avoid nuts as eating them during pregnancy may be linked to nut allergy in babies. Keep a bottle of water handy to prevent dehydration.

- Know your rights. You're entitled to time off for antenatal appointments, and you can stop work any time from 11 weeks before your due date.
- Delegate as much as you can, so you can concentrate on important tasks and not get overwhelmed with all that filing and photocopying.
- Ask if you can rearrange your hours so you can avoid travelling in rush hour – especially if you work in London (the tube is stressful at the best of times, let alone when you're pregnant!).
- If your job allows it, ask if you can work from home occasionally.
- If you're desk-bound, keep your feet raised – an upturned bin makes an ideal footstool – and take a walk around the office every hour.
- If you're on your feet all day, sit down for 10 minutes each hour.
- If work is dangerous for your baby – for example, heavy manual lifting – you're entitled to be reassigned (see p5 of Your Personal Pregnancy Planner).

## Keep calm

Even if you're not pregnant, Christmas is guaranteed to turn you into a quivering, stress-filled jelly. But you have the perfect

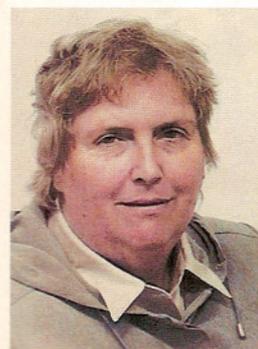
excuse to relax – so use it. Follow our plan for a stress-free seasonal celebration:

- Don't cook a 30lb turkey for all your relatives – wangle an invitation to someone else's this year.
- Buy ready-made mince pies for any visitors that may drop in.
- Don't bother braving the last-minute shopping crowds – order presents, decorations and cards by mail order or on the internet (but be sure to check how long they will take to deliver).
- Buy a ready-decorated Christmas tree – try DIY superstores or department stores such as Marks & Spencer.
- Go to parties – having fun with your friends is a great de-stresser. But be a Cinderella and make sure you're tucked up in bed by midnight.
- Chill out on the sofa in front of your favourite Christmas film – *Miracle on 42nd Street* or *It's a Wonderful Life* make great festive viewing, especially with a mug of hot chocolate and a plate of mince pies!
- Write a Christmas wish-list of relaxing presents like aromatherapy candles, bath oils or mushy videos.

### Rob Links

For more information about your health during pregnancy, go to [www.motherandbaby.co.uk/pregnancy](http://www.motherandbaby.co.uk/pregnancy)

**Next month: Early bleeding – why it's more common than you'd think**



## What the expert says

'Antenatal anxiety is as common as postnatal anxiety but it is rarely talked about. Although more research is needed on which stress reduction techniques really work, in general it's important to slow down and not rush around, to talk to friends and family if you feel anxious, and to see your GP if stress levels get too high.'

**Professor Vivette Glover of the Fetal and Neonatal Stress Research Centre, Queen Charlotte's Hospital, London**

### ♥ The best thing about being pregnant...

'Actually getting pregnant in the first place – after three years of trying and two goes at IVF.'

### ✗ ...and the worst

'Bruised ovaries and painful cramps in the first three months – thanks to the IVF.'

*Jacqui Coghlan, London*