

PILATES & PREGNANCY

Many women want to continue to exercise during pregnancy, but are understandably concerned about the effects that physical exertion could have on them and their babies. Gentle exercise is often recommended to improve circulation, ease 'morning sickness', and help promote a feeling of wellbeing.

Pilates is a gentle, low impact exercise, considered to be one of the best forms of exercise for pregnant women. Pilates helps to improve and maintain the strength of your pelvic floor and deep abdominal muscles, which can be beneficial for labour and childbirth, and also help to regain a pre-pregnancy figure. One of the key concepts in Pilates is 'core strength', i.e. working to strengthen the torso by improved posture, and relieving pressure on the joints of the spine by increasing strength and awareness of the muscles surrounding the torso. This strength and awareness can help to ease backaches that can be experienced during pregnancy and breastfeeding. Pilates helps to relax both the body and mind, and there is a strong emphasis on controlled breathing and the use of breath to aid both relaxation and exertion, all of which can

help throughout pregnancy, childbirth, and of course the trials of being a new mum! The improved circulation and better awareness of breathing can also allow an increased oxygen flow to the womb, which can reduce distress to the baby during labour.

Although many of the Pilates concepts can benefit pregnant women, there are certain Pilates exercises that should be avoided if you are pregnant. If possible, try to find a special 'Pilates for Pregnancy' course near you. Otherwise, be sure to tell your instructor that you are pregnant, and which trimester and week of pregnancy you are in, as this will determine the exercises that are appropriate for you.

1st Trimester

You might experience some sickness and nausea during the first few months of pregnancy due to the hormonal changes occurring in the body. You might also feel more tired than usual, but gentle exercise like Pilates can actually make you feel revitalized and ease your nausea.

Throughout your pregnancy you should avoid exercises that involve lying on your stomach, such as 'Swan Dive'. It is advisable that you at least start doing basic pelvic floor exercises and static contractions of deep abdominals as early as possible in pregnancy ready for the birth, even if you do not feel comfortable with a full exercise class during this time.

2nd Trimester

Many women find the second trimester the easiest stage of pregnancy, as the nausea often subsides, and energy levels increase. This is when women are often said to 'bloom'. Take advantage of this renewed energy to strengthen the core muscles, but avoid lying on the back for extended periods from about 20 weeks, as it can reduce the blood flow returning to the heart (known as 'supine hypotension', i.e. low blood pressure when lying on the back), which can result in dizziness. Your instructor should advise you on appropriate adaptations to exercise. This is also the stage of pregnancy when the hormone relaxin is at its highest level. Relaxin helps to relax the fibrous tissue in the pelvis area to enable childbirth. However, it also affects all the joints and connective tissue in the body, so avoid excessive strain and stretching, especially in ligaments (tissues that join bones to other bones), as it can reduce joint stability.

3rd Trimester

You might find that energy levels drop again in this stage of pregnancy as the weight of the bump and baby increases. However, as ever you will find that some gentle exercise helps you to feel re-energised and revitalized. Pilates will also help you to focus on breathing and relaxing. The effects of relaxin combined with the extra weight can result in lower back pain, but focusing on correct posture and strengthening the core muscles can help to alleviate this. Pilates can also help you cope with the inevitable changes in your centre of balance.

Post Natal Pilates

If you were able to do Pilates during your pregnancy, it will be easier for you to regain your pre-pregnancy figure, but even if you haven't it can still be beneficial. You can recommence your basic pelvic floor and deep abdominal contractions immediately after childbirth. The pelvic floor exercises will help reduce the likelihood of stress incontinence after pregnancy, and strengthen and tone the vagina, returning it to its pre-birth state.

Around two thirds of women experience 'diastasis recti' during pregnancy – a separation of the superficial 'six-pack' abdominal muscles. A midwife or qualified ante and post natal exercise specialist should be able to perform a 'rec check' to ensure that the two halves of the muscle are beginning to knit back together. Until they have, and until you have had an 'all-clear' at your six-week check (for straight-forward natural births, up to 12-weeks for Caesarians or difficult births), you should avoid full Pilates, but static deep abdominal contractions will help increase the healing process.

Once you are ready to begin full Pilates again, be aware that relaxin can continue to affect the joints up to 5 months after birth – possibly longer if you breastfeed. Tell your instructor whether you had a vaginal or Caesarian birth, so that she can adapt the exercises appropriately. Contrary to popular belief, your abdominal muscles are not cut in Caesarian sections, they are simply pulled aside (similar to diastasis recti), so you can still regain your pre-pregnancy figure.