

# Pilates: Pregnancy & Beyond

By Beth Downey

**W**hen Lenore Denbin came to Pilates almost 11 years ago, she was aiming to tighten up her abdomen six months after having given birth. Eighteen months later and pregnant for the second time, she continued practicing Pilates as part of her regular exercise routine.

Since so many of the exercises address the pelvic floor area, the part of the body that supports your growing belly, Pilates is a great way to keep it strong during pregnancy. “I was interested in a fast recovery after delivering my second child, and because of its major focus on the core, I felt Pilates would help me get back into shape quickly. I practiced Pilates until two weeks before delivery and credit my ability to push for three plus hours and deliver over a ten pound baby to my strong abdominal muscles.”

Meegan, 26 wks pregnant, does a side bend on the high barrell



A woman's body goes through many changes during pregnancy. A hormone called Relaxin is released in a pregnant woman's body to prepare her for childbirth. This allows the ligaments around the joints to stretch, which in turn makes the joints less stable and more vulnerable to injury. The ribcage begins to open while the abdominals stretch to three times normal size. Regular exercise provides muscle tone, strength and endurance; three qualities needed not only to help carry the

weight gain but also to prepare for the challenge of labor. Exercising during pregnancy can also help reduce backaches, fatigue and swelling. How you approach your exercise program during pregnancy is important. As always, check with your doctor before beginning any exercise program.

## EXERCISE GUIDELINES

*The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) guidelines for exercising while pregnant include:*

- In the absence of contraindications, pregnant women are encouraged to engage in 30 minutes or more of mild to moderate exercise on most, if not all, days of the week.
- During the second and third trimesters, pregnant women should avoid standing motionless for too long and exercising while supine (lying on their backs). Supine positions can decrease the blood flow to the uterus.
- Less oxygen is available for aerobic exercise so modify the intensity of your routine accordingly. Stop exercising when fatigued and do not exercise to exhaustion.
- Participation in a wide range of recreational activities appears to be safe. However, activities with a high risk of falling or abdominal trauma should be avoided.
- Do not become overheated and monitor your heart rate while exercising to be sure it does not exceed 140 beats per minute. The target heart rate will vary by your level of fitness.

*Body Precision's Pilates Teacher*



Meegan Rubin - thigh stretch on the cadillac

*Certification Program also makes the following recommendations:*

- Refrain from movements that take the pelvis above the head as this can cause air to enter the uterus, which can be dangerous (i.e. jackknife). The hip bones should stay anchored onto the ground although the legs can lift (i.e. single leg circle).
- Avoid EXTREME rotational, twisting and side bend movements of the spine because of the (small) chance of the placenta tearing away from the uterus.

- Avoid positions and movements that present a challenge to balance in order to prevent falls. Remember, since the extra baby weight is carried in front of the body and not equally distributed, a woman's center of gravity changes.
- Avoid bouncing on a ball as this may cause dilation.
- Always check with your doctor before continuing to exercise or start a new exercise program especially if you are a high risk pregnancy.
- Listen to your body and do not do anything that does not feel "right." Stay in touch with your body's new needs and experiences. Slow down and rest as needed.

### PILATES AND PREGNANCY

Since Pilates is non-weight bearing, the exercises are ideal for pregnant women. Pilates works by strengthening the core of the body as well as the postural muscles that support the weight of the baby. Strengthening the back and improving posture makes carrying the baby easier, with less risk of pain and injury. Also, exercises can be modified to your current condition during any stage of the pregnancy. As the size of the belly increases, more leg, arm and shoulder exercises should be added. Pregnant women have plenty to do on the 'chair' - a piece of equipment that usually doesn't get as much attention as others. The chair offers lots of exercises in the standing or seated position. Pilates breathing techniques encourages extra oxygen to flow to the unborn child and can also contribute to a smoother delivery.

## POSTPARTUM GUIDELINES

Pilates makes sense for postpartum women because stronger abdominal muscles create a body that can return quicker to pre-pregnancy condition. The ACOG says you can resume your pre-pregnancy routine based upon your personal physical capability, although your obstetrician may ask you to wait until your six week postpartum checkup. Joints and ligaments remain relatively loose for approximately three to five months, so you'll want to ease back into your Pilates routine with care. Also, most women develop a gap in their abdominal muscles as their belly expands during pregnancy and labor. This gap takes about 4-8 weeks to close, so you want to avoid strenuous abdominal exercises until then. If you had a normal vaginal delivery and exercised throughout your pregnancy you can probably start with light exercises within days of giving birth. If you stopped exercising during your pregnancy or are a newcomer to fitness, you'll need to take it slow the first month. If you had a C-section, expect to wait longer, usually about six weeks.

## PILATES AND BEYOND

After birth, women can continue to experience the benefits of Pilates. Pilates helps get the abdominal muscles and pelvic floor muscles back into shape. Many mothers experience lower back, hip and shoulder pain as they carry their babies without sufficient core strength. Constantly carrying your baby on one side of the body can also contribute to misalignment where one hip and shoulder may sit higher than the other. Pilates bilateral work helps bring the hips, shoulders and spine back into balance so mothers can fulfill the hectic needs of the new baby

and participation in daily activities. The realignment reduces pain and the stress often experienced in a new mother's daily life and helps restore the body's natural harmony.

Lenore states "After giving birth by C-section, I was back in the Pilates studio in four weeks. It was difficult initially to retrain my abdominals but after a few weeks of regular practice, I was back to where I left off and my muscles definitely remembered where they had been pre-pregnancy."

Finding time to exercise for a new mother can be difficult; Body Precision is starting a 'Mommy & Me' Pilates class in January which promotes close physical and emotional interaction between mother and child. The exercises help strengthen and realign the core while the mother's touch stimulates increased body awareness and muscle control for the baby. This class provides a unique exercise experience to strengthen the loving bond between mother and child.



Beth Downey is the owner of Body Precision Pilates Studio in Rosemont, PA and the director of the nationally recognized Body Precision Teacher Certification Program for traditional Pilates. Beth has been teaching Pilates for over 10 years and specializes in working with clients with back and neck issues. Body Precision is an educational member of the Pilates Method Alliance. You can reach Beth at Beth@phillyfitmagazine.com