



# message

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# Exercise and Pregnancy: the Conundrum

Pregnancy is such an extraordinary adventure, simultaneously universal and deeply **personal**. Each woman lives each pregnancy as a unique experience. That's why when it comes to approaching exercise and pregnancy, the "right" exercise is the kind of **exercise that suits you**. To better understand what kind of exercises are appropriate, let's start by looking at what happens to the body during pregnancy.

## HOW DOES THE BODY CHANGE DURING PREGNANCY?

All of the changes listed below are inevitable. The first two will happen and there is little exercising can do to impact how you feel related to these changes:

› **Hormonal changes:** The hormones that are maintaining a cozy womb for your baby and preparing your body for delivery and lactation also wreak havoc on the body. Joints, muscles and ligaments loosen, and the body gradually becomes more supple and also more fragile. These hormone changes make it almost impossible to *build* muscle mass, so one of the goals of exercising while pregnant is to **maintain muscle mass**.

› **Skin and hair:** The hormones often make skin, hair and nails stronger, plumper, and healthier looking. On the other hand abdominal skin can often get very dry as it is stretched and thinned.

Maintaining a healthy movement practice during pregnancy can **help your body adapt**

by **Emily Mazo-Rizzi**

to the following changes and potentially avoid aches and pains:

› **Weight gain:** This completely normal part of pregnancy can be psychologically difficult for many women. Additional weight can pull on the lumbar spine and potentially compromise the joints, the knees in particular.

› **Spinal and pelvic changes:** The lumbar spine, low back, becomes more arched. The pelvis is pulled forward. The thoracic spine, upper back, tends to become more rounded. This pull on the low back can lead to back pain and potentially sciatica.

› **Breathing capacity:** Due to the baby needing your oxygen and the compressed rib cage and lungs, breathing capacity is reduced. It is harder to breathe as deeply as before, and a less active diaphragm can also lead to digestion problems.

› **Circulation:** Weight gain, reduced breathing capacity and the body working hard to meet the needs of the growing fetus all mean that general circulation is compromised. This can lead to swelling and water retention. Your heart rate and blood volume both slowly increase throughout pregnancy, making all physical excursions more effortful.

## WHAT CAN BE DONE TO SUPPORT THESE CHANGES?

The most important thing is to **keep moving!** As a Pilates instructor my approach to exercise and pregnancy is to apply the five goals

of Pilates to the pregnant woman's body.

**1. Uniformly develop the body:** Uniform development during pregnancy is a slight oxymoron but by continuing full body workouts women can prevent “falling” into all of the extreme positions the body is being pulled in. Besides the fact that physical activity can help avoid excess weight gain, full body workouts will maintain muscle mass, in particular the deep abdominals and pelvic floor muscles, while strengthening the legs. This will assist your body in better supporting the additional weight and can keep back pain, knee pain and sciatica away. Most importantly, these workouts will help train the body for the **full body marathon** of delivery.

**2. Decompress the spine:** **Spinal articulation** movements are an integral part of the Pilates method as they release tension and promote mobility. By moving the spine correctly, space is created for the fetus, thus repositioning it closer to the inside of the body. This will also reduce the risk of back pain and sciatica, so common because of the pull on the lower back.

**3. Improve breath:** Any time spent concentrating on breathing or breathing and moving together will help maintain an active and healthy diaphragm and retain as much lung capacity as possible. It will encourage fetal growth and help the mother to be calm. This practice will make using breath as a means to **manage pain** during labor much easier.

**4. Improve circulation:** Staying physically active will help **keep oxygen and blood circulating** and eliminate toxins. Pilates exercises by nature strive to increase lung capacity and focus on moving the spine and all of the joints. All of this will hinder the swelling and water retention that are so common for pregnant women.

**5. Foster a mind-body-spirit connection:** Regular, gentle exercise will help a pregnant woman stay aware of her body and be con-

nected with the fetus and the changes happening deep inside on a daily basis. Taking quiet time to move and to breathe will center the woman, making her more comfortable and **aware of her own body**. All of this promotes general well being, self esteem and can aid in labor.

### WHAT KINDS OF EXERCISE ARE APPROPRIATE? ANY DOS AND DON'TS?

The number one rule when exercising while pregnant is to **listen to your body**. If you really don't feel up for exercise on a given day, don't do it. It is best to mention to your doctor what kind of exercise you are doing. If you have a complicated pregnancy you absolutely must consult your doctor before exercising.

#### DON'TS

- Avoid exercises that put unnecessary pressure on the pelvic floor. Some examples are: running, jumping, intense aerobics, and horseback riding.
- Ban exercises that involve risks of falling. Some examples are: horseback riding, ice skating, and skiing.
- From the second trimester avoid typical abdominal exercises, such as sit-ups. Once the belly starts to grow bigger, doing these exercises can potentially put too much pressure on the most superficial layer of abdominal muscles, commonly referred to as the “six pack,” the *rectus abdominis* muscles. Compressive pressure on these muscles can result in a split in along the *linea alba* ligament, which runs approximately from belly button to sternum. It is possible to fix a split and sometimes it can go back on its own, but it is still best avoided.
- If you have contractions, spotting or feel over tired, do not exercise.

## DOS

- › Do low/no impact exercises such as Pilates, yoga, swimming, walking, biking, aqua biking, and water aerobics.
- › Do exercises that feel good to you and that help maintain muscle mass, keep your energy up and improve your breathing.
- › Find instructors who offer classes specifically for pregnant women or who are able to modify exercises in regular classes to suit pregnant women's needs.
- › In general, any kind of exercise, besides the ones cited above in the "Don'ts," that you were doing before you were pregnant you can continue while pregnant.
- › Specific work on breathing: either through exercise, birth preparation classes, sophrologie or meditation.

## WHAT IS THE BARE MINIMUM?


If you've really never been into exercising

and aren't about to start now, just be sure to walk every day, which is easy for Parisians. Especially pay attention to continuing to **walk and move** once you are on maternity leave. Ideally you would also at least work on your **breathing** as mentioned above, which will be invaluable when it comes time for delivery.


## MOST IMPORTANTLY...

Keep in mind that as your body changes throughout your pregnancy your energy level will fluctuate, as will your desire to move. Each and every day listen to **how your body feels.** •

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