

Waiting for Baby: Pre-Natal Pilates

Pilates can be very beneficial for pregnant clients, but it's important to know their limitations. We talked to some of the most experienced prenatal Pilates educators for their advice on safely and effectively working with expecting moms.

by Shari Berkowitz

Many of our clients want to continue their practice throughout their pregnancies. And they're wise to do so: Strong abdominals and backs help reduce their chances of discomfort and pain and help them keep their balance even as their center of gravity shifts on a daily basis. Working the upper-back muscles will help balance the weight of enlarging breasts. Well-exercised abdominals and pelvic floors lead to easier labor and recoveries. And in general, staying active helps women have a better outlook mentally about pregnancy, labor and motherhood!

I reached out to several Pilates teachers who focus their energies on teaching pre-natal clients to bring you useful information on what to do and what not to do when teaching your clients.

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WHO CAN DO PRENATAL PILATES?

Doctors suggest that women should not start a new form of exercise program while pregnant, and most Pilates pros abide by this. If the client has already been practicing, she can continue at the level she's currently at, but if she's new to Pilates, she ought to wait until after she gives birth.

"Pregnant women should also always work with a qualified Pilates teacher experienced in fitness for prenatal woman," says Connie Borho, who has over 25 years of experience specializing in the field of maternity fitness and is a Senior Level Teacher Trainer for Peak Pilates and the owner of Balance Pilates & Yoga Centers in the Tampa Bay area.

TABOO TO TALK? COMMUNICATION IS KEY!

Many clients hold back revealing that they are pregnant in the first trimester, either because they're superstitious or because they may fear an early miscarriage. But we need to encourage our clients to tell us if they are planning on getting pregnant or if they are pregnant, no matter how early on. As the trainer, you need to know.

Consider putting up a discreet little sign in the changing room or restroom that says, "If you're trying to conceive or are currently pregnant, please let your teacher know. Even if you're not telling anyone else, we need to know in order to take good care of you."

MAINTAIN FITNESS; DON'T INCREASE IT.

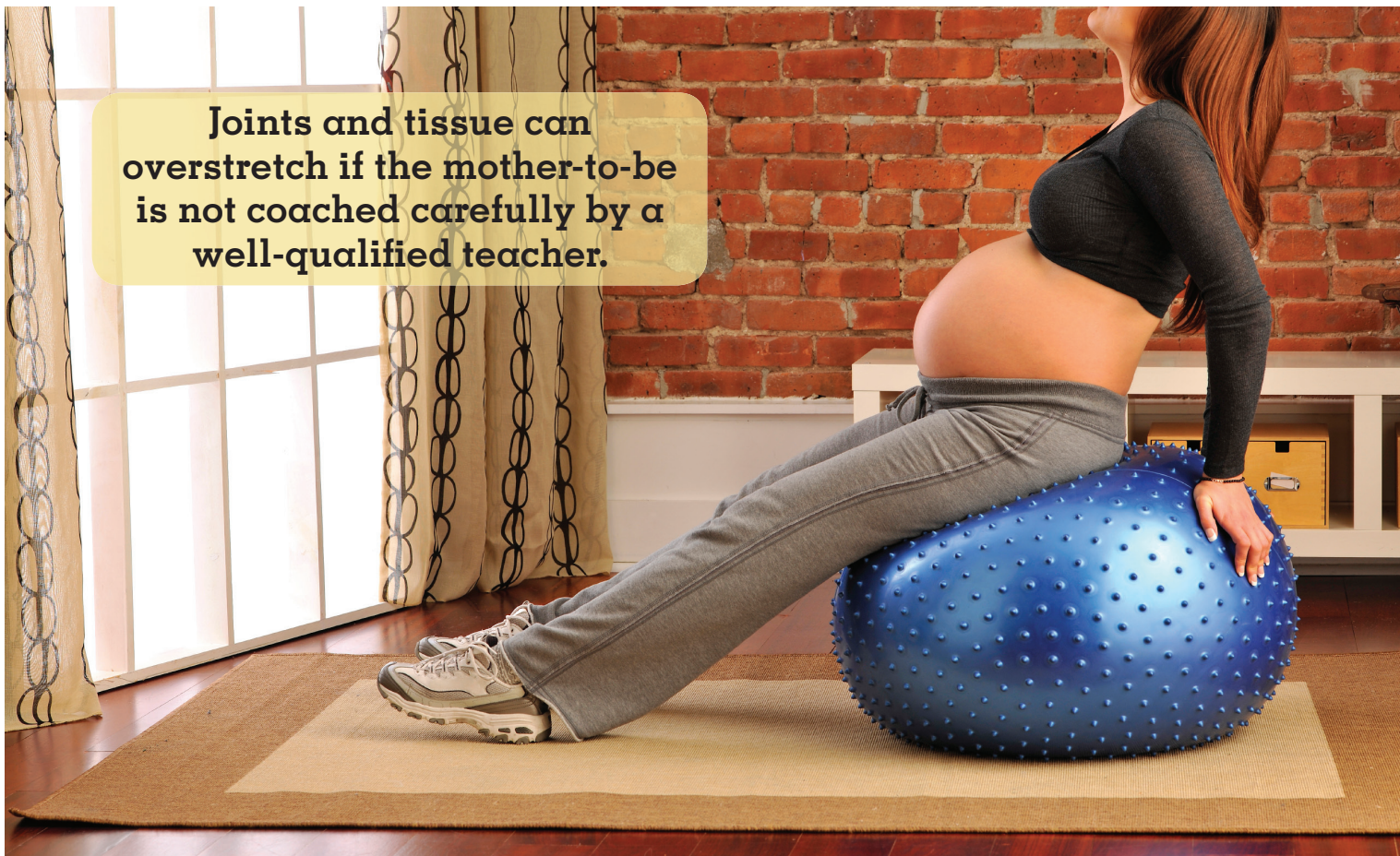
Throughout pregnancy, maintaining health is the goal. That means that as long as a client feels able and is cleared by the doctor, she can do her usual set of exercises in the first trimester, with a couple of exceptions: Right away, you must eliminate "Hanging" off the Cadillac and not do it again until well after she gives birth because of circulation issues.

Then you must start to continually omit, modify and replace exercises depending on the development of her body and what does and doesn't feel good.

Sometimes our pregnant clients want to do too much and we must hold them back. "It's hard for women," says Chrissy Romani-Ruby, PT, MPT, ATC of PHI Pilates. At the start of a session, "really look your client in the eye and ask 'How are you today?' If she says she's been spotting or has a headache that won't go away, then send her home!" Encourage her to tell you if an exercise doesn't feel right and then move on to another. This isn't the time to push through.

No matter what, from day one, keep her cool and hydrated. The first trimester "is important to the neurological development of the baby, and because of this it is crucial

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that care be taken to ensure that the mom not get overheated," explains Borho. So keep the A/C on and make sure your client takes water breaks...often, whether she wants to or not. Educate her...and she will agree.

YES, YOU CAN WORK THE ABDOMINALS!

Many fear that focused abdominal work is dangerous. Actually, working the transverse abdominus is essential. This band of muscle will help support the growing uterus, support the spine and help in labor.

It's strengthening the rectus abdominus that brings us the most concern. Diastasis recti is the separation of the rectus abdominus down the center/linea alba, explains Jennifer Gianni, creator of the Fusion Pilates for Pre & Post Natal Method DVDs and teacher training and owner/director of Fusion Pilates Asheville in North Carolina. "If the split between the rectus halves is bigger than a finger's width, then you have a diastasis recti. This can occur during pregnancy, during labor or in the months right after delivery. In many cases, the splitting of the rectus is genetic, so it is more likely to happen to certain people. But the way that you exercise during and after pregnancy is also a major factor. If your client has a diastasis and they go into abdominal curling exercises, the diastasis will just split open more."

About 60 percent of women naturally experience a diastasis recti. As Romani-Ruby reiterates, it "doesn't tear with abdominal work...it only gets worse if it already exists."

Still, take precautions: by five months, avoid curling or rolling the client up from the mat or carriage. That means no Roll-Up, no curling head and chest up for the Hundred or Abdominal Series, no Teaser, no curling up for Coordination or Backstroke, etc.

So what do you do?

1. PROP UP On any exercise that requires lifting the head and chest for the length of the exercise, prop your client up on a wedge, small barrel or large pillow. This way she is not engaging her rectus abdominus for the exercise and is not inhibiting her inferior vena cava (which we will discuss in a moment).

2. MODIFY On any exercise that involves a roll up from a mat to a sitting position, start from the top and work only halfway down. That means...replace the Roll-Up, Neck Pull, Rolling Exercises and Teaser with the Half-Roll Down...every time! And truly only go halfway down...or even less: Just far enough so that your client is staying engaged across her abdominals but not struggling for it.

TO STRETCH OR NOT TO STRETCH?

While your pregnant client might complain of aches and tightness, we have to watch out about over-stretching them. Why? "Relaxin, a hormone secreted in pregnancy starting at about week 12, acts on the connective tissue of the woman to enable her joints, especially the pelvis, to achieve greater flexibility in order to accommodate the growing baby and to facilitate childbirth," Borho explains. "Unfortunately, it also can create hyper flexibility, and joints and tissue can overstretch if the mother-to-be is not coached carefully by a well-qualified teacher."

Does this mean we don't stretch at all? No, you can stretch, but within the exercises, keeping a smaller range of motion. Steer clear of exercises that are designed to stretch open the hips (Ballet Stretches to the side) especially. What might feel good to the mother at the moment may be an over-stretching of the ligaments rather than stretching the belly of the muscle.

BACK OFF SUPINE EXERCISES.

After about five months, when the mother lies on her back, the weight of the uterus inhibits the blood flow to the inferior vena cava, a large vein that carries de-oxygenated blood from the lower half of the body into the heart. After four to five minutes, the mother will feel uncomfortable or dizzy and shift positions. So make sure that you only keep your client on her back for two to three minutes, maximum, at a time. After that, have her shift to a different position, which will mean altering the order of exercises. Working on a wedge eliminates this need because the weight of the uterus is not cutting off blood flow.

WHAT ABOUT LYING ON THE STOMACH?

It's important to know that it's not dangerous to the baby for the mother to lie on her stomach. The baby is surrounded by amniotic fluid, placenta and very, very thick walls of the uterus. However, it may be uncomfortable for the mother to lie prone (this can occur at different points in the pregnancy for different women, starting in the first trimester).

When the abdomen is too big, modify Swan or Single-Leg Kick by having your client place a small Barrel across the top of the thigh and base of pelvis with her hands on the mat under her armpits, her feet down on the mat. Here, she can do supported back extension with a smaller range of motion and no pressure on her abdomen.

When that's no longer possible, have her get on all fours and work her balance and support by extending

Include the baby in your cues. Imagine that your baby is like a little koala bear holding onto a eucalyptus tree...climb your baby up the tree.

one arm out, hold for 4 counts, then replace the hand on the mat, repeating 4 times with each arm, then the other. Repeat with the legs, keeping the leg low toward the mat. Always keep the lower spine supported with the abdominals and maintain stable shoulder and pelvic girdles. Do Pulling Straps sitting up, facing the back of the Reformer with a small range of motion. You can be safe *and* creative!

STRENGTHEN THE PELVIC FLOOR.

"The pelvic floor should be worked in both a strengthening and a lengthening manner," Gianni says.

Pilates works the pelvic floor simply by "hugging the midline," making a strong inner thigh connection and strengthening the pubococcygeus muscle. Gentle use of the Magic Circle with parallel legs will help strengthen this muscle, which both aids in supporting the base of

the pelvis while the fetus grows and helps ease labor.

BEWARE OF TWINGES.

As the abdomen grows, the round ligaments, which are usually passive, help balance the new position and weight of the uterus. These ligaments that are just higher than her groin can sometimes be strained and twinge during an exercise. It's a momentarily shocking feeling for the mother. If this happens to your pregnant client, have her sit for a moment, drink a bit of water and re-center. Then if the pain is gone, try to resume the exercise or move onto the next. However, if the pain remains, she ought to stop. It might not be Round Ligament Pain, it might be her round ligaments are just telling her that enough is enough for the day...it's time to rest and come back next session.

HELPING HER FIND HER BALANCE.

"Balance will be challenging as the baby gets bigger and bigger, displacing the mother's center of gravity, so she needs to constantly adapt to these changes," Borho says. So it's important to add some safe balance challenges to help her "practice" keeping her growing body on an even keel!

Remind your client of this constant change and practice safe, supportive balance exercises every session. The 2x4 or calf-raises exercise or Magic Circle legs while lightly holding onto the vertical poles of the Cadillac are great! However, more challenging exercises like Going Up Front on the Wunda Chair or Splits on the Reformer are not acceptable. We must only choose exercises where she can easily catch herself if she loses her balance.





HELPING CLIENTS FEEL GOOD ABOUT THEIR CHANGING BODIES.

As our client's body is expanding, she may not always be excited about it. Romani-Ruby encourages us to "comment on her 'cute little belly,'" reminding women that this is normal and that many men think pregnancy is sexy.

Now is the time to start using great images to help your client connect to her abdominals which gets more difficult as pregnancy advances. Try including the baby in your cues: "Pull your baby in and up along your spine." "Imagine that your baby is like a little koala bear holding onto a eucalyptus tree...climb your baby up the tree." Create your own that celebrate the baby inside!

EMPHASIZE WHAT SHE CAN DO.

"Too much emphasis is made about what a pregnant client shouldn't do, which creates a space of fear and tension," says Carolyne Anthony, owner of The Center for Women's Fitness. "It's important to create a program for your client that focuses on what she can do and seamlessly eliminates what she cannot."

MAKING A COMMUNITY.

"Perhaps the best way to make pre-natal clients feel comfortable is to offer a class just for them," Gianni suggests. "Keep them small and always introduce new moms to the group and let the group know if this is the first, second, etc. baby. It is important for moms to have a connection with other moms and their group fitness classes are an important place to connect and to create community. Also, make sure that your studio gives them the time and space to hang out and chat after class."

HOW LONG CAN SHE STAY IN SESSION?

Some clients can continue doing Pilates right up until they give birth, some need to stop in their first trimester. Remember, every pregnancy is different. Most of the time, your client knows when she needs to stop: She is either too tired or too encumbered by her almost full-term baby. Constant communication is what gives you the clues to make the right decisions together! **PS**

Guidelines for Pre-Natal Clients:

- 1 Get doctor's approval to exercise.
- 2 Keep studio cool—even if client disagrees.
- 3 Keep client hydrated—take many water breaks.
- 4 Only do exercises that feel good. If something feels wrong, skip that exercise.
- 5 Remember, the goal is to maintain fitness/health, not increase it.
- 6 Beware of overstretching the ligaments.
- 7 After five months, eliminate exercises that roll up from the floor and replace with Half-Roll-Down.
- 8 After 12 weeks—eliminate unnecessary pressure on inferior vena cava—only do supine exercises for 2-3 minutes max.
- 9 Use props—pillow, wedges, small barrels to keep client comfortable and safe.
- 10 When in doubt... leave it out.



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