

pregnant poise

Women worldwide have discovered the power of pilates and have flocked to its studios in droves, writes Cathy Netherwood. Now pregnant women are discovering that this unique method of exercise is tailor-made for them.

You're pregnant and going through a huge life shift. Your body is changing dramatically. You're no doubt exhausted, maybe nauseous, and fitness may not be your top priority – but in pregnancy it's essential. Pilates, with its core muscle focus and gentle, floor-based exercises, is particularly good for pregnant women – but it is only advised if you are already fit. Always check with a health professional before starting any new physical exercise while pregnant.

Why pilates?

Pilates is a body-strengthening program originally designed for dancers and boxers. It centres on the deep abdominal muscles, improves support for the lower back and helps to relax tense shoulders. Breathing and alignment are key components, and many exercises are floor-based, requiring less energy output.

Director of The Pilates Room in Sydney, Kimberley Garlick is a mother of three and has been practicing and teaching pilates since before her first pregnancy. "Your body is changing hormonally, structurally and chemically," she says, "and the endorphins mean your mental state is changing. Pilates helps with all three. You're training your core muscles, excellent for pushing and for recovery; the extra strength gives stamina for labour; and the concentration, control and breathing also help."

Co-director of Sydney's Powerhouse Personal Training, Gina Richter, explains pilates works on the very muscles pregnant women need to support their pregnancy.

"The deep abdominals, pelvic floor, buttocks and lower back are all required to hold the weight of the baby when it's in the

uterus. Most women who experience back pain during pregnancy do so because those muscles are weak."

Pilates is gentle but specific. "It's not like walking round the block or getting on an exercise bike," says Gina. "It's very focused, it's safe because you're usually on your back on the floor in controlled situations, and it gives you postural awareness. As the baby's weight increases, you slowly build strength and awareness, so by the third trimester, when you need those muscles to be firing, you understand how to hold your body."

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Don't let it all hang out!

During pregnancy, the body's centre of gravity shifts forward. Instinctively, women tend to let their stomach hang forward – which stresses the spine and the muscles. That's a mistake, says Kimberley. "It leads to 'sway back', very common in pregnant women. Pilates teaches how to draw in and lift the deep abdominals."

Posture, movement and alignment are all interlinked. "When your posture is out of alignment it's like the wheel of a car being out of whack," explains Gina. "Add the weight of a baby and you're in trouble."

Gina is reluctant to take on first-trimester women. "The risk of miscarriage then is much higher, especially in a first pregnancy. With a second one I'd be more confident. I usually tell women to come back in the second trimester." Neither trainer would take on pregnant women with no previous experience of exercise.

One mum's story

When Susie Maclean was pregnant with her second baby, she carried her awkwardly and needed a C-Section. The baby got stuck across the stomach, putting out her hips and pelvis, affecting the nerves and causing sciatica, resulting in a lower-back problem.

A doctor recommended pilates, and three years ago Susie joined Kimberley's class. "It really improved and strengthened my back," says Susie. Pregnant again and due in May, Susie is keeping up her pilates. "When I found I was pregnant, Kimberley

recommended I continue. I think if I hadn't done so, my back would have gone by now." Susie only goes once a week, yet it's made a major difference to her strength and stamina. "I love it!" she says. "I like feeling fit and healthy and I come away feeling fantastic after a class." **AP**

Now see it on screen!

We don't recommend that you try teaching yourself pilates (pregnant or not), but *Pilates Trilogy* by Kimberley Garlick and Michelle McKessar will help you practise after a class. It caters for all fitness levels, including new mums. DVD \$39.95, VHS \$29.95. Call 1300 557 110 to order.



(These photos are a guide only – they are not intended to be instructions)

Modified Roll Down

This mobilises the spine and stretches the hamstrings



Cat Stretch

Mobilises and stretches the spine while engaging the abdominals and pelvic floor



Modified Tricep Dip

Strengthens through the arms, specifically the tricep muscles



Clam

Strengthens the inner thighs and buttocks while activating through the pelvic floor and abdominals



Modified Side Leg Lift

Strengthens the inner thigh and buttocks while activating through the pelvic floor and abdominals



Spine Stretch

Stretches the back



Spine Rotate

Mobilise the thoracic spine, middle of the back



Do's & don'ts

- Do consult your GP about appropriate exercise for you as an individual
- Don't consider pilates while pregnant if you're unfit or unused to regular exercise
- Don't try to teach yourself pilates while pregnant, even with a handbook or video
- Do consult a qualified pilates instructor to discuss your needs
- Don't do pilates until your second trimester unless you are already experienced
- Do ensure the pilates class is specifically geared to pregnant women
- Do seek advice before exercising if you have any spotting, bleeding or other complications.

Contacts

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Personal Training (02) 9818 6234; Pilates International (02) 9699 5509