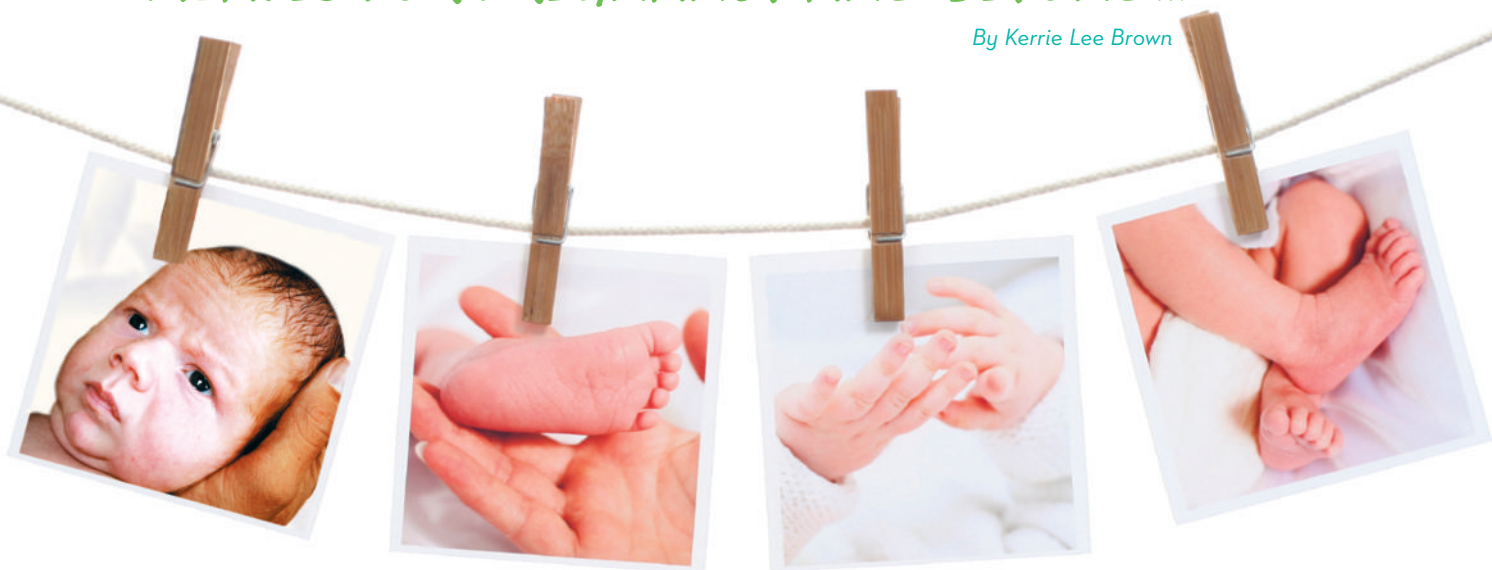


THE MOTHER LOAD

PILATES FOR PREGNANCY AND BEYOND...

By Kerrie Lee Brown



A woman's body goes through many changes during pregnancy – from circulatory to hormonal and these cause ligament laxity and can in turn cause joint instability and possible lower back pain. So as long as the client's physician has given consent for her to work out during her pregnancy, then it is perfectly safe for exercise to continue with modifications.

Pilates can promote a greater awareness of head, shoulder and neck alignment to prevent neck tension for the mom-to-be. It can also help the pregnant client focus on breath and control of movements, as well as aid in balance – which is key as the body changes to accommodate the baby.

The beauty of Pilates is that it can be individualized for anyone's ability, especially after the 16th week of gestation when pregnancy guidelines indicate that lying on the back be avoided. With positioning adjustments and the addition of light equipment, Pilates enables mothers-to-be to continue exercising at a mid to moderate level.

Pilates emphasizes not only core stability, but also joint stability keeping stress off the joints and strengthening the entire body from the inside-out. Activation of the pelvic floor muscles is taught to aid in activating the deep stabilizing muscles of the lumbo-pelvic area (lower back). Activation of the pelvic floor in turn will help prevent incontinence and strengthening the lower back will help reduce the common occurrence of lower back pain, all major complaints during and after pregnancy.

SAFE PRENATAL PILATES INSTRUCTION

It is important for instructors to be trained properly so that they can work with pregnant exercisers. Instructors who know how to tailor exercises for their specific client's needs at every

stage are going to be successful and most likely retain their pregnant clients well after they give birth.

It's important for Pilates instructors-in-training to be taught the most up-to-date information available whether it be for the pre or post-natal client, an elite athlete or someone who has never worked out a day in her life. With pre-natal clients in particular, they need their Pilates program modified in a number of ways – from support on equipment, to incorporating various props throughout each trimester.

An appropriately modified Pilates workout can benefit moms-to-be by targeting key muscle groups such as the shoulder girdle muscles, glutes, hamstrings and hip abductor muscles. All of which are essential in helping to promote a better posture as the body changes and can assist in maintaining core strength as the abdominals become more lax and stretched from the growth of the baby.

EXERCISING THROUGH THE TRIMESTERS

Pregnant clients benefit greatly from the increased body awareness developed from doing Pilates. The Five Basic Principles we teach clients, Breathing, Pelvic Placement, Rib Cage Placement and Scapular (shoulder girdle) Movement and Stabilization, and Head and Neck Placement educate the client on how to work out safely and effectively.

In the first trimester (0-12 weeks) most women don't need to adjust their Pilates program too much if they have been participating in Pilates before becoming pregnant. However, if moms-to-be may feel sick in the mornings and tired, we suggest that comfort be the best guide for participation in Pilates – as the breasts and other areas of the body may become tender so lying

on the stomach may be uncomfortable.

Focus on pelvic floor exercises and avoid end range movements like holding extreme stretches. It is best to work on stabilizing the joints and staying strong and consistent, but pregnancy is not a time to increase your fitness level. Again, focus on the Five Basic Principles.

In the second trimester (13-26 weeks) it is important to avoid supine (lying on your back) positions (according to the American Council on Exercise guidelines). For circulatory reasons, change positions regularly. In the second trimester the greatest changes to joint stability occur. It is important to work out carefully, keeping in mind if you go into the end range of the joints there will be no support.

Emphasis on strengthening and stabilizing the lower back in a neutral position is crucial. To do this, Pilates exercises are modified by using props such as the Stability Ball, Arc Barrel or Spine Supporter. It is suggested that many of the exercises that are usually performed supine are adjusted to a seated position, leaning back on your elbows, standing or kneeling. After all, it's all about comfort for the mom-to-be and baby.

In the third trimester the baby may be positioned under the ribcage contributing to feeling a burning sensation and shortness of breath. Instructors should avoid supine positions and positions where their clients feel pressure into the rib cage - and transitions between exercises should be slow. A pillow can be used to support the belly in side lying positions. This will avoid undue pressure on the lower back. Also, four-point kneeling helps relieve pressure and ankle and foot exercises are great at this stage to increase circulation.

IMPORTANT TIPS FOR PREGNANT CLIENTS

When working with pregnant clients, it's essential to offer effective cues and additional guidelines as their bodies change:

- **BREATHE.** For the pregnant participant, focus on a natural, relaxed breathing style is essential. Encourage your clients to work within the boundaries of their changing body (i.e. elevated diaphragm).
- **“HUG YOUR BABY”** is a great image to create the subtle connection to the inner core unit muscles (transverse abdominus, pelvic floor, diaphragm, multifidus) rather than using words like “compress” and “flatten.”
- **MOBILIZE ANKLE JOINTS.** Pregnancy can affect blood flow and circulation in the lower extremities. Tightness and cramping in the lower legs is also a common complaint. Adding ankle and

foot exercises will improve mobility and increase circulation throughout the pregnancy.

• FOCUS ON SHOULDER GIRDLE AND SCAPULO-HUMERAL RHYTHM.

Expectant moms need to think of their exercise programs as “training” for delivering, carrying, breastfeeding and holding their new baby. Having a strong upper body and a good understanding of



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how to move dynamically through the shoulders and upper back allow for a smooth transition from the prenatal to the post-natal demands placed on the body.

PREPARING FOR BIRTH

Pilates is ideal for relaxation and preparation before labor.

Pilates instructors encourage a relaxed and full breath pattern, which focuses the mind and encourages concentration and this breathing helps moms-to-be avoid unnecessary muscular tension while encouraging core activation. With increased body awareness and concentration moving inward during Pilates – emphasis on proper breathing patterns is important.

NOW THAT BABY'S HERE...

After child birth, post-partum Pilates is the perfect way to get back into shape and lose that so-called baby weight – but again, medical clearance for the client's physician or medical practitioner must be given before normal exercise resumes.

It's important to remember that the joints will still be unstable and to start back carefully. Make sure to activate the pelvic floor lightly to help activate the deep stabilizers of the lumbo pelvic (lower back) area. Avoid putting too much stress on the lower back for a while; for instance, don't place both legs up in the air at the same time, lifting too heavy weight. Remember the closer you keep things to the body, less stress there will be on the lower back.

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PRENATAL PILATES EXERCISES:

1. THE CLAM SHELL

Lying sideways with both legs bent and knees aligned with hips. Top arm straight and reaching out in front of shoulder, underneath arm bent and under head. Pelvis and spine neutral.

In: prepare

Ex: laterally rotate top leg so knee points towards ceiling, keeping top foot down.

Simultaneously, lift top arm up to ceiling, Keep pelvis and torso stable and neutral

In: return to starting position

Repeat 8-10 times on both sides

2. SINGLE LEG BEND & STRETCH/LOWER AND LIFT COMBO

Leaning back on forearms with elbows directly under shoulders and back in a slight imprinted position. Both legs bent with one foot on floor and the other leg in tabletop position.

In: prepare

Ex: stretch tabletop leg out on high diagonal

In: return to tabletop

Ex: stretch tabletop leg out on high diagonal

In: keep leg straight and lift foot to ceiling without tucking pelvis under

Ex: lower straight leg back to diagonal

In: bend to tabletop

Repeat set times on both legs.

