40 Weeks of Pilates: Pilates Through Pregnancy

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Abstract

During pregnancy, a woman’s body goes through some major physical changes. The most obvious change is a woman’s growing baby bump and weight gain. According to the American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, a woman with a normal BMI is expected to gain between 25 and 35 pounds throughout her pregnancy (1). The extra weight in the front of a woman’s body can shift their center of gravity and place stress on joints and muscles, especially those in the pelvis and lower back. This can cause a woman to be less stable, cause back pain, and make them more likely to lose their balance and fall, especially later in pregnancy. As you can imagine, all that extra weight causes her body to work harder than before she was pregnant (1). Some other changes a woman might experience are relaxed ligaments, anxiety, stress, morning sickness, and tiredness. A structured, regular Pilates practice can help a woman improve postural imbalances, strengthen the muscles in the abdominals and back to support their growing belly, maintain balance during the rapid physical changes of pregnancy, connect with and strengthen pelvic floor muscles, avoid anxiety through breathing and focus, and much more.

Pregnancy lasts about 40 weeks, counting from the first day of a woman’s last normal period and is broken into three stages, or trimesters. The first trimester includes week 0 through week 13 of pregnancy. The second trimester includes week 14 through week 27 of pregnancy. The third trimester includes week 28 through week 40, or delivery of the baby. These trimesters are important for a Pilates instructor to understand as they can be used as a guideline when putting together an appropriate repertoire for a pre-natal client. This paper will discuss the physical and emotional changes that are common throughout pregnancy by trimester. Each section will discuss the limitations, areas of focus, and provide an example repertoire for a woman in that particular trimester of her pregnancy.
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**First Trimester**

Pregnancy marks the beginning of an exciting new chapter in a woman’s life. During the first 3 months of pregnancy, a woman who was already practicing Pilates can continue with much of the same exercises she did before the big news. The most common symptoms of the first trimester of pregnancy include fatigue- or even exhaustion- dizziness, nausea, and vomiting. Your client should remain aware of signals from her body that tell her to rest, or take a drink, and should not attempt to increase her endurance levels to extreme limits during pregnancy (3). Women also tend to have increased stress levels during this time in their lives. It is smart to start focusing on breathing and relaxation during Pilates sessions now in order to help maintain healthy anxiety levels throughout the length of the pregnancy.

During a woman’s first trimester, her blood pressure lowers and hormone levels change. This causes dizziness or feeling faint. Women in their first trimester should avoid the following Pilates exercises as they could exacerbate symptoms of dizziness and nausea: inversions, such as Short Spine, Jackknife, Tower and Roll Over; extreme balances; spinal flexion exercises in which you bend forward over your legs, and strenuous abdominal exercises, such as Stomach Series (3).

The focus of a Pilates repertoire during the first trimester of pregnancy should be on core strength and muscle memory. A woman needs to focus on strengthening her entire core- including the abs, back, waist, and pelvis- so it can provide support during pregnancy, giving her body strength and resilience as her belly grows (4). This is an example repertoire using the BASI Block System for a client who was practicing Pilates before her pregnancy and is in her first trimester. When progressing through these exercises, make sure to give time to rest, hydrate, and check in with the client to see how they are feeling. The exercises are specifically put together to avoid inversions, extreme balance challenges, and frequently moving back and forth from laying, sitting, and standing.
**First Trimester Workout**

1. **Warm Up:** Complete the following exercises on a mat.
   a. Pelvic Curl
   b. Spine Twist Supine
   c. Chest Lift
   d. Chest Lift with Rotation

2. **Footwork:** Complete the following exercises on the reformer.
   a. Double Leg Footwork: Parallel Heels, Parallel Toes, V Position Toes, Open Heels, Open V Toes, Calf Raises, Prances
   b. Single Leg Footwork (complete on both the left and right leg): Single Leg Heel, Single Leg Toes

3. **Abdominal Work:** Complete the following exercises on the reformer. Allow the client to extend her legs if she needs additional challenge or rest her head down if the work is too challenging.
   a. Hundred Prep
   b. Hundred

4. **Hip Work:** Complete the following exercises on the reformer.
   a. Frog, Circles Down, Circles Up, and Openings

5. **Spinal Articulation:** Complete the following exercises on the reformer.
   a. Bottom Lift
   b. Bottom Lift with Extension

6. **Stretch:** Complete the following exercises on the reformer.
   a. Standing Lunge
   b. Kneeling Lunge

7. **Arm Work:** Complete the following exercises on the reformer.
   a. Supine Arms: Extension, Adduction, Up Circles, Down Circles, Triceps

8. **Additional Legs:** Complete the following exercises on the chair.
   a. Forward Lunge
   b. Backward Step Down
9. Lateral Flexion: Complete the following exercises on the chair. Repeat on both sides of the body
   a. Side Stretch

10. Extension: Complete the following exercises on the chair.
    a. Swan Basic
    b. Back Extension Single Arm
**Second Trimester**

During the second trimester, most early pregnancy symptoms will ease up or even disappear. This means a woman will feel less queasy and her energy levels should begin to pick up. Also, by the end of this trimester, the bulge in her lower abdomen may start looking like the beginnings of a pregnant belly (6). In week 14, a baby can weigh about 1.5 ounces and in week 27 the baby can weigh 2 pounds. The baby’s weight isn’t the only thing that should change during these weeks- a woman can expect to gain weight as well. If she started her pregnancy at a normal weight, she can expect to gain around one pound per week for a total of about 14 pounds over this trimester (6). These more dramatic physical changes in a woman’s body require her to be more aware of safety concerns when practicing Pilates than she did during her first trimester.

Because of hormonal changes and weight gain, a pregnant client should avoid exercises that involve lying face down (prone) or lying on her back (supine) starting in the second trimester. Lying supine can begin to pose problems when a woman has gained significant weight in her belly. The weight of her stomach can cause her veins and arteries to be compressed, which, in turn, can limit blood flow to the baby. Not all expecting mothers have a problem, however, and you can feel if there’s an issue by watching for dizziness. If the client begins to feel dizzy, have her sit up to alleviate symptoms. Instead, build strength with standing, kneeling and sitting exercises to limit major safety concerns (5).

During pregnancy, a woman’s rectus abdominis, which is the major ab muscle that runs down the front of her torso, spreads apart at the center slightly. Though this is a normal occurrence, she should avoid exercises that force the abdominals to strongly contract against the pull of gravity, as they can cause her abs to spread further apart. This includes exercises that challenge you to lift your head and shoulders or legs. Examples are the hundred, single leg stretch, double leg stretch, and roll-up (5). **Figure 1** depicts the
separation of the rectus abdominis muscles, also known as Diastasis Recti (8). Instead, build strength with standing, kneeling and sitting exercises to limit major safety concerns.
During the second trimester, focus should be on posture, core stability, and balance. Help the client focus on maintaining a neutral, upright position and protecting their back and neck as their belly and breasts grow (4). Make sure to be available to assist with balance and stability as they go through their exercises. Below is an example repertoire using the BASI Block System for a client who was practicing Pilates before her pregnancy and is in her second trimester. If a client doesn’t feel comfortable working on the mat because they struggle to get down to the floor and stand back up, exercises can be done on the Cadillac or on a Reformer Mat Conversion Table.

**Second Trimester Workout**

1. **Warm Up:** Complete the following exercises on a mat. If client begins to feel dizzy from laying on the mat, stop the exercises and replace them with the warm up from the Third Trimester Workout.
   a. Standing Roll Down
   b. Pelvic Curl
   c. Spine Twist Supine
2. Footwork: Complete the following exercises on the chair.
   a. Double Leg Footwork: Parallel Heels, Parallel Toes, V Position Toes, Open V Heels, Open V Toes, Calf Raises
   b. Single Leg Footwork (repeat on the right and left legs): Single Leg Heel, Single Leg Toes
3. Abdominal Work: Complete the following exercises on the reformer.
   a. Short Box Series: Round Back, Flat Back, Tilt
4. Hip Work: Complete the following exercises on a mat with the short box.
5. Spinal Articulation: Complete the following exercise on the mat.
   a. Spine Stretch Forward
6. Stretch: Complete these exercises on the reformer.
   a. Standing Lunge
   b. Kneeling Lunge (or repeat standing lunge)
7. Arm Work: Complete the following exercises on the reformer.
8. Additional Legs: Complete the following exercise on the reformer.
   a. Single Leg Skating
9. Lateral Flexion: Complete the following exercise on the reformer.
   a. Mermaid
10. Extension: Complete the following exercise on the mat.
    a. Cat stretch
**Third Trimester**

The third trimester begins in the 28\textsuperscript{th} week of pregnancy and continues until delivery (typically around 40 weeks). The final 3 months of pregnancy can be particularly taxing on a woman’s body. Her pregnancy weight gain will pick up speed at the beginning of her third trimester, which will challenge her posture and balance. She could feel an increase in fatigue because of the demands of pregnancy on her body (7). Each woman has a different experience during pregnancy, so the key to a successful Pilates practice in the third trimester is to take plenty of time to rest and always ask the client how she is feeling. If any exercise causes discomfort, skip or modify.

During the third trimester, don’t just limit but avoid exercises laying on the front or back and exercises that could cause or worsen Diastasis Recti. The baby grows from 2 pounds to somewhere between 6 and 8 pounds during this time, which would definitely cause a safety concern. The postural work completed during the second trimester will be tested by this increase in weight and shifting of her center of gravity to the front. During pregnancy, an increase in the normal lumbosacral curve (lordosis) can develop, and a compensatory curvature in the cervicodorsal region (exaggerated anterior flexion of the head) can develop as a way for the body to maintain balance. Aching, numbness, and weakness of the upper extremities may result. Large breasts and a stoop-shouldered stance can further accentuate the lumbar and dorsal curves. These common postural problems are illustrated in Figure 2 (2).
Slight relaxation and increased mobility of the pelvic joints are also normal during this stage of pregnancy. In order to prepare for delivery, a woman’s body produces Relaxin, an ovarian hormone that assists in this relaxation and softening (2). Because of this, avoid intense stretching or trying to increase flexibility during the third trimester. Exercises like Standing Side Stretches and Full Lunge on the reformer should be avoided. Also, some women might experience discomfort during hip work. If this is the case try to decrease range of motion or discontinue exercises that cause discomfort.

Anxiety, stress, fatigue, and insomnia are also common during the third trimester. Keep this in mind when working through exercises and make sure to focus on connecting with the breath, finding the mind-body connection, and taking time to rest when needed. As always, encourage clients to listen to and connect with their changing body.

The focus of exercising during this phase of pregnancy should be on mobility of joints, gently stretching, and labor preparation (4). Pay special attention to the pelvic-floor muscles and maintain mobility in the pelvis, spine, and hips. Focus on exercises that
stretch through the chest and lower back and strengthen the upper back and abdominals to help avoid postural issues. Below is an example repertoire using the BASI Block System for a client who was practicing Pilates before her pregnancy and is in her third trimester. Again, if a client doesn’t feel comfortable working on the mat because they struggle to get down to the floor and stand back up, exercises can be done on the Cadillac or on a Reformer Mat Conversion Table.

**Third Trimester Workout**
1. **Warm Up:** Complete the following exercises on a standing and using a ballet barre or secured (with a safety strap) push through bar for support.
   a. Standing Roll Down
   b. Standing Pelvic Tilts
   c. Standing Side Stretch with Rotation
2. **Footwork:** Complete the following exercises on a standing and using a ballet barre or secured (with a safety strap) push through bar for support.
   a. Parallel Heels, Parallel Toes, V Position Toes, Open V Heels, Open V Toes, Calf Raises
3. **Abdominal Work:** Complete exercises on a mat using the step barrel.
   a. Chest Lift
   b. Overhead Stretch
   c. Side Lift
4. **Hip Work:** Complete the following exercise on the Cadillac.
   a. Single Leg Side Series (repeat exercises on both sides of the body):
      Changes, Scissors, Circles Forward, Circles Back
5. **Spinal Articulation/Full Body Integration:** Complete this exercise on the Cadillac.
   a. Kneeling Cat Stretch
6. **Stretch:** Complete these stretches on the Ladder Barrel.
   a. Gluteals
   b. Hamstrings
   c. Adductors
   d. Hip Flexors
7. Arm Work: Complete the following exercises standing behind the Cadillac or Reformer Tower.
   a. Arms Standing Series: Chest Expansion, Hug-a-tree, Circles Up, Circles Down, Punches, Biceps
8. Additional Legs: Complete the following exercise standing behind the Cadillac or Reformer Tower.
   a. Squats
9. Lateral Flexion: Complete the following exercise on the mat.
   a. Side Bend (repeat on both sides of the body)
10. Extension: Perform the following exercise standing behind the Cadillac using the push through bar.
    a. Standing Version of Sitting Forward/Standing Roll Down
Conclusion

Pilates is a wonderful way for a woman to maintain strength, increase mobility, decrease discomfort, and reduce stress and anxiety during pregnancy. Pilates instructors need to make slight changes and modifications based on the client’s trimester and her specific needs. Some of these changes and modifications include limiting or avoiding prone and supine exercises or exercises requiring inversions, focusing on light stretching instead of intense stretches, strategically moving from one piece of equipment to another as to not exasperate morning sickness, and steering clear of exercises that add additional pressure on the rectus abdominis. A strong focus on breathing, mind-body connection, taking time to rest, and communicating are key components to creating a successful Pilates practice during pregnancy. With careful consideration of the body’s changes and limitations, a repertoire can be designed for and benefit women throughout all three trimesters.
Works Cited


<https://mutusystem.com/mutu-system-blog/you-can-have-a-flat-tummy-and-a-small-diastasis-recti-i-have>.