

Prenatal Pilates: Holistic Movement For Your Changing Body

by Paula Harris

Pregnancy involves a lot of changes. That human growing inside you is constantly changing. Your body changes. How you move changes. Life changes! And what your body needs is also changing all the time.

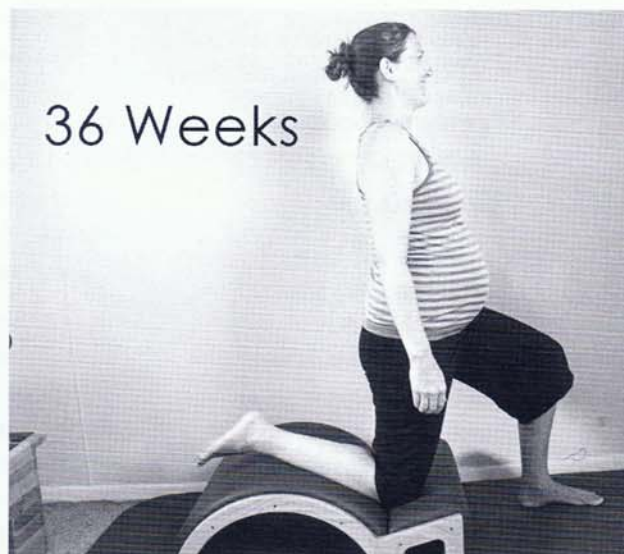
While many people may think of Pilates only as a lot of ab exercises, behind all of what we do in Pilates is an awareness of our bodies and how we move. Prenatal Pilates isn't about dozens of ab curls (the ab work tends to be minimal and so sneakily included you might hardly notice it) but is instead about supporting your body and what it needs as your pregnancy progresses, including preparing for childbirth and then the new changes that come with carrying your baby (and all the baby paraphernalia).

A lot of how I work with pregnant women is based on what nature is telling us about the body. Your posture changes, as does your centre of gravity; prenatal Pilates aims to support your body to make these changes easier. Your inner thighs, hips and lower back may become tighter as the baby grows and lowers, which can be compounded by the hormone relaxin (released later in pregnancy) causing ligaments around the pelvis to, well, relax; prenatal Pilates works to release any tension and stretch out these areas.



One thing that nearly all of my clients love is when we work on stretching through the sides of their bodies. It's the movement that brings out deep breaths of relief, especially from those in their third trimester! Again, this is just responding to how the body is changing naturally; the rib cage expands and your bump may be sitting high, giving you less room for your lungs to take in breath. By creating more space between the ribs in the sides of the ribcage, you get more breathing room, and that can feel rather delicious.

The strength work included in prenatal Pilates primarily focuses on the upper back and shoulders (in preparation



for helping you carry your new baby) and on the lower body (to help with all the bending down and picking up than inevitably comes with babies).

Connecting with the pelvic floor muscles in an important part of every session (no Kegels here!). The pelvic floor needs to be able to relax to help allow your baby an easy exit, but then postnatally we want the muscles to reconnect to start bringing back the pelvic floor function.

Breathing and relaxation are other major components to each session. Breathing is a natural action (one we've been doing all our lives!); in prenatal Pilates what we're creating is an awareness of the breath and its rhythm. This helps to bring your body into "rest and relax" mode, which is much more conducive to an easier time in late pregnancy and childbirth (compared to having your body in "fight or flight" mode). Breathing also helps to activate the pelvic floor and abdominals, creates focus and even helps you to establish your body alignment – meaning that during the breathing and relaxation time, you become more aware of how your body is positioned, which you then carry with you through the rest of your day.

In short, prenatal Pilates works to help your body open and release, in preparation for birth. And, in that, it helps to prepare your body for recovering postnatally, as you and your family continue to change and grow.

Paula Harris is a Pilates instructor with additional training as a Pre and Post Natal Pilates Specialist. She also has over 15 years experience in pregnancy massage and is a registered naturopath. Paula offers both group and one-to-one sessions; email her at move@fluidformfitness.co.nz