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Keep safe and keep that shape! Sydney-based mother and Pilates instructor, Leah Simmons, takes us through an exclusive at-home Pilates regime for mothers-to-be.

Keep that shape!



It's no secret that one of the first thoughts that enters a woman's mind when she finds out she's pregnant is how on earth she will maintain her body throughout the journey on which she's about to embark. Whether she voices this concern out loud or keeps it to herself, a woman's body is virtually the last thing she has control over.

As soon as I found out I was pregnant, all the information I seemed to come across told me in no uncertain terms that I was about to become the host vessel to some alien-like creature that was going to suck me dry. Frightening, right?

In my line of work, I have come across many women who have all asked me the same question: "How can I stay in shape while also dealing with fatigue, morning sickness and weight-gain? And how do I know what is safe for me and my baby?"

The term "exercise" can be scary for some. It can conjure up images of sweat-soaked bodies, packed gyms and aching joints. The Pilates method of exercise is a low-impact workout that specifically targets, strengthens and invigorates muscle groups. It is ideal for any level of fitness and is beneficial to pre- and post-natal women as it focuses on core strength and pelvic floor connection – the very areas that are affected by pregnancy.

Pilates can help a woman stay connected to her changing body, improve posture and reduce pregnancy aches and pains.

1. Neutral Pelvis/Neutral Spine

The Neutral Pelvis/Neutral Spine position is the basis for each Pilates exercise so establishing the correct position will help you to master each exercise safely. It is optimal to work out on a surface that is comfortable but firm, e.g. an exercise mat or a couple of towels on the floor.

Lie on your back with your arms relaxed down by your side, your feet flat on the floor and your knees bent up at a 90-degree angle. Starting with your feet together, slowly separate your heels keeping your toes together, then bring your feet into line with your heels. This establishes your unique parallel position where your feet, ankles, knees and hips are all in one line.

Breathing naturally, start to gently rock your pelvis forwards and backwards, tucking and arching, warming up the muscles in your lower back and your abdominals. Repeat five times. Then relax and allow your pelvis to settle into a position between your tuck and your arch. Your hipbones and your pubic bone should be on the same horizontal plane. This is your Neutral Pelvis.

Focus your awareness now to your spine. Notice that your tailbone is resting gently on the floor. As you journey up through your spine, notice the natural curve in your lower back. The back of your ribcage is relaxed and resting on the floor and there is a gentle curve in your neck. The back of your head is gently resting on the floor. Soften your chin towards your throat, lengthening your neck. This is your Neutral Spine.

If you are unable to lie on your back, you can still establish your Neutral Pelvis/Neutral Spine lying on your side.





2. The Pelvic Roll-Up

Focus: Spinal Articulation and Flexibility.

Lie on your back in your Neutral Pelvis/Neutral Spine position. Breathe in to prepare. As you breathe out, gently press your lower back into the floor, tuck your pelvis under and lift your tailbone into the air. Roll each vertebra up off the floor one at a time until you are one long line from your knees to your ankles.

Breathe in to hold the position, squeezing your bottom. As you breathe out, roll each vertebra back down onto the floor one at a time finishing in the start position. Repeat three times.

To exercise safely during pregnancy it's important to understand what happens to your body while you are pregnant. I'm sure you will be shocked to know that during pregnancy, the abdominal muscles will stretch by over 50 percent of their original length!

At about 20 weeks, and often sooner for a second pregnancy, the abdominal wall will begin to separate along the linea alba (the line that runs down the centre of the abs) with the two abdominal halves moving away from each other. Some women develop a dark vertical line running down from the belly button; this is the separation of the abdominal wall.

As gruesome as this sounds, it's totally normal and will occur in almost all women during pregnancy. However, when this happens, there is less support for the lower back, which often results in increased lower back pain or other problems. Strengthening the abdominal muscles is critical during pregnancy to help support the growing uterus, decrease lower back compression and reduce pelvic pressure. Women who practise safe abdominal strengthening during pregnancy have less lower back pain, less pelvic pain, better mobility, easier deliveries and faster recoveries.

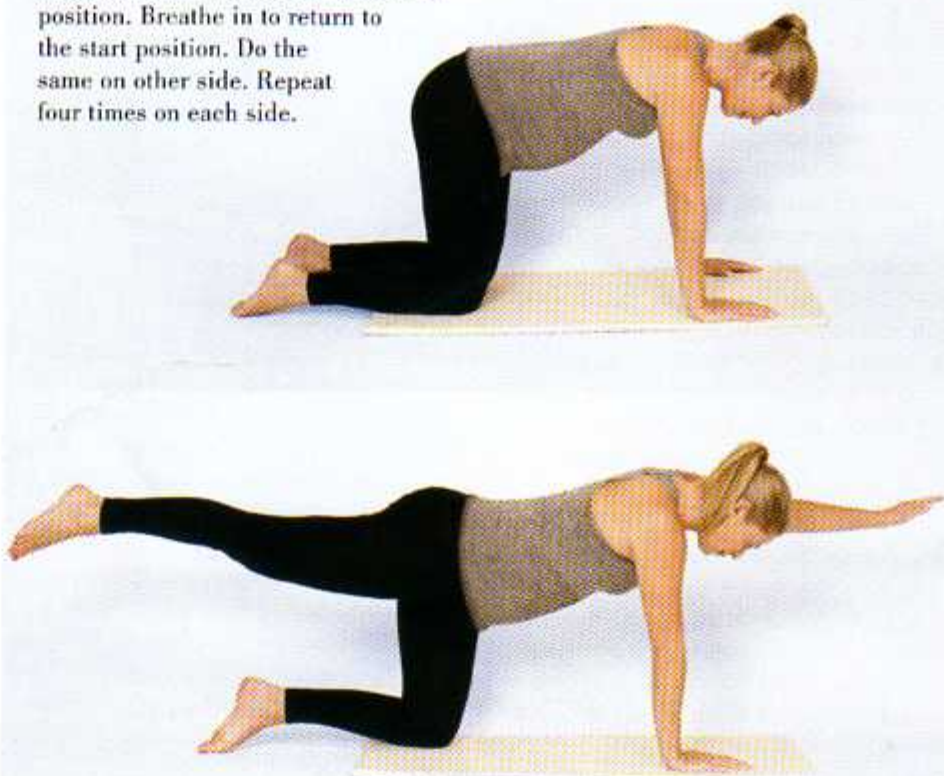
Pilates can be done in the comfort and safety of your own home. The exercises detailed require no special equipment or apparatus. It is important that you take →

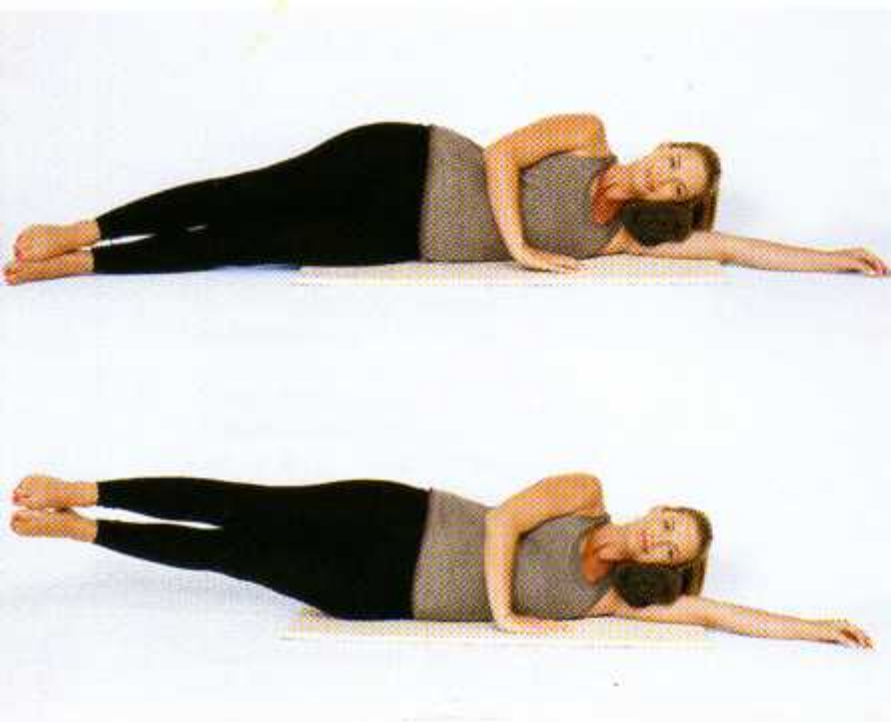
3. Four Point Kneeling

Focus: Core Stability and Postural Alignment.

Kneel on all fours with your hands flat on the floor making sure your wrists are directly under your shoulders and your knees are directly under your hips. You should have a 90-degree angle at your shoulder joint and your hip joint. Take care that you are not over-arching your back in this position.

Breathe in to prepare. As you breathe out, keep your torso and pelvis parallel to the floor. Reach your right arm straight out in front of you and slide your left leg away from you into the air. Hold this position. Breathe in to return to the start position. Do the same on other side. Repeat four times on each side.





4. The Side Lift

Focus: Lateral Stabilisation (the sides of your abdominals, inner thighs, balance and control).

Lie on your right side with your right arm stretched underneath you in the same alignment as your torso. Place a rolled towel or small cushion between your right shoulder and ear to support your neck and head. You can also place a cushion underneath your belly for support if needed.

Place your left hand in front of your chest for support with your shoulder drawing down towards your hip. Your legs should be elongated and straight with your hips stacked on top of each other and your toes pointed. Bring your legs a few inches in front of your body to assist balance and protect your lower back.

Breathe in to prepare. As you breathe out, lengthen both legs as far away from your hips as possible and lift them a few inches off the floor maintaining your neutral-spine position.

Keeping your legs squeezed together, breathe in as you lower both legs until they hover just above the floor. Repeat 10 times.

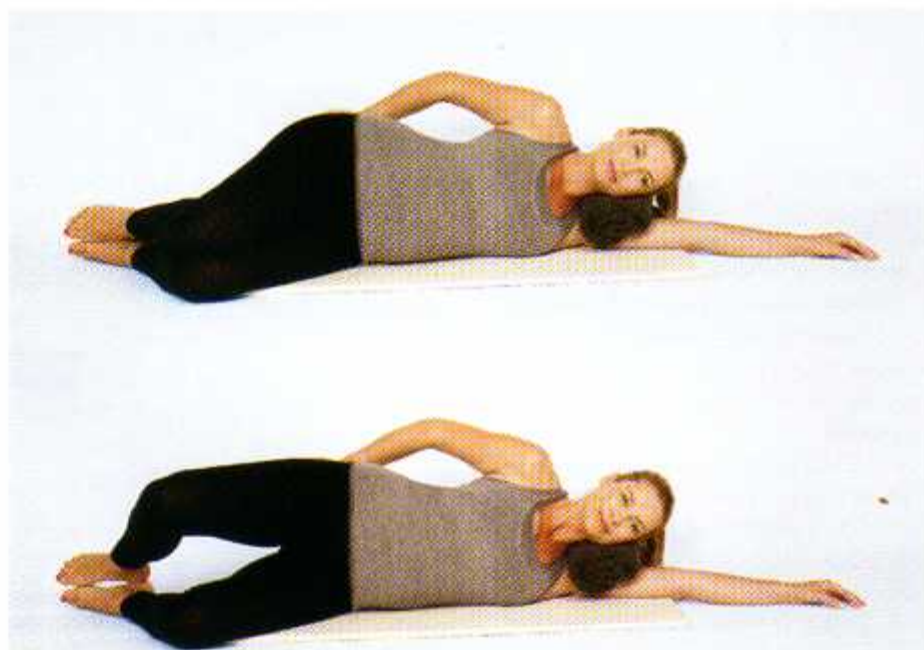
the time to connect with your body and breath while you are doing the exercises to gain the most from them. Most importantly, embrace your changing shape and the phenomenon that is growing inside you. Look after your body and you will be rewarded.

Some important Do's and Don'ts for exercising while pregnant:

- DO stay hydrated. Make sure you are drinking plenty of water.
- DO exercise slowly and methodically. Your muscles are more lax during pregnancy so overstretching is a possibility.
- DO stop immediately if you feel dizzy, short of breath or light-headed.
- DON'T hold your breath while exercising. You would be amazed at how many people do this!
- DON'T overheat or allow your heart rate to rise above approximately 140bpm.

Although these exercises are considered "safe" for pregnant women it is always best that you seek the advice of your medical practitioner before commencing any type of exercise. ❧

Leah Simmons lives in Sydney. Pilates has been an integral part of her life for almost eight years. She teaches at the Pilates Moves Studio, Double Bay (pilatesmoves.com) and has an 11-month-old son, Ryder. If you would like a more detailed information sheet please email leah@thelandingpad.com.au.



5. The Clam

Focus: Bottom!

Lie on your right side with your right arm stretched underneath you in the same alignment as your torso. Place a rolled towel or small cushion between your right shoulder and ear to support your neck and head. You can also place a cushion underneath your belly for support if needed.

Bend both knees to a 90-degree angle so that your heels are in line with your tailbone. Place your left hand onto your left hip and keep gently pressing your hip forward to keep your hips stacked and prevent rolling backwards.

Breathe in to prepare. As you breathe out, lift your left knee towards the ceiling keeping your left hip pushing forwards and your feet together. As you breathe in, slowly lower your left knee back to meet your right knee.

Repeat this exercise until you "feel the burn". The more slowly and controlled you make each movement, the more intense it will be.