

# It's the Eye of the Tiger!

You've been pregnant for a few months and you're starting to feel like Rocky after he's gone a few rounds in the ring. We speak to Jacqueline Lee from Pilates Inc. about the benefits of regular exercise for a pregnant mother as well as the different exercises she can do to keep in fighting-fit shape during the pregnancy and after giving birth.



Your feet are bloated, there is a constant ache in your lower back and you keep feeling out of breath. The last thing on your mind is to subject yourself to even more physical exertion as you feel that you're already getting enough exercise carrying this baby in your womb.

Well, banish that thought!

Keeping fit during pregnancy helps you to improve your stamina and strength for labour, and might even shorten

the time you're in labour. Also, regular exercise helps you get back into shape after delivery.

So, what are some suitable exercises that a pregnant working mother can incorporate into her daily life? Jacqueline Lee, fitness enthusiast, mother of two (and soon three), and director of Pilates Inc., part of The Moving Body Group, demonstrates five exercises that are suitable for mothers, no matter what trimester they're in. ❧

## WIDE SQUATS

Wide squats are great for strengthening the pelvic floor muscles, which support the bowel, bladder, womb and vagina. During pregnancy, these muscles can be overly strained due to the constant weight bearing on them, which might cause stress incontinence (leaking of urine when you sneeze or cough). This can be prevented by regular exercise of the muscles.

### What to do

1. Put your feet slightly more than shoulder-width apart with your toes pointing 45 degrees outwards
2. Put your hands on your hips and squat downwards, making sure that



- your back remains straight and your knees don't go past your toes
3. Once the top of your thighs are parallel to the floor, stop and hold for two seconds before coming back up again
  4. Complete eight repetitions
  5. For breathing, exhale when you're going down and inhale when you're heading up

### What not to do

Remember that you're not bowing down and working your core, as Jacqueline demonstrates (pictured on left), but rather working your leg and pelvic floor muscles. Doing this might actually hinder the blood and oxygen supply to the baby in your womb, so be careful!

Performing a squat with your knees past your toes exerts more



force on your cruciate ligaments (pictured left). Although your body's natural biomechanical movement does allow your knees to go past your toes (contrary to popular belief that your knees shouldn't go past your toes when squatting), there will be more weight exerted on your joints now that you're carrying a newborn, so it's best not to if your body is not conditioned.

## BRIDGE

The bridge is a very popular exercise that helps to strengthen the glutes, hamstrings and core, which are all the important muscles that you'll use regularly when you're pregnant.

A key thing to remember when doing the bridge is not to lie in a supine position, as it restricts the flow of oxygen to the baby in the womb because you're compressing the big blood vessel at your back. Instead, use a wedge (pictured). If a wedge is not available, Jacqueline recommends using pillows!

### What to do

1. Place your hands flat at the side, with your tailbone and buttocks on the wedge or pillow
2. Beginning from your tailbone, focus on slowly moving your body off the wedge or pillow until you reach your shoulders, which remain flat on the ground, as pictured in the image below
3. Hold for two seconds before slowly moving your back down, starting from the top
4. Breathe out when you're moving your back upwards, and breathe in when you're returning to your starting position



Keeping fit during pregnancy helps you to improve your stamina and strength for labour.

## QUADRAPED (also called Bird-dog)

Despite being named bird-dog, the exercise doesn't resemble a bird or a dog. However, it's a great way to train your shoulders and core, especially the transversus abdominis, the muscles running along the side of your trunk that are vital in helping you give birth.

### What to do



1. Support yourself with your hands and knees, with your knees directly underneath your hips, your wrists directly underneath your shoulders and your fingers pointing forward
2. Keeping your spine in a neutral position (i.e. no excessive sagging or arching), slowly raise and straighten your left (or right) arm until it's parallel to the ground
3. Hold it for two seconds before lowering it to your starting position and repeating the same movement with the other arm



4. If you would find the above exercise too easy and would like something more advanced, try lifting both your arm and leg simultaneously until they are parallel to the ground



5. Remember to lift opposite parts or you'll lose your balance (lift right arm and left leg together; lift left arm and right leg together)
6. At all times, keep your head and neck in a straight line with your spine

## SIDE STRETCH

(with rotation)

The side stretch is an effective way to lengthen the muscles in between your ribs and can be done whether you're sitting on your office chair or relaxing on the couch at home. Besides making you feel relaxed and great, regular side stretches also help you breathe better and more effectively in the long run, and there'll be lots of breathing when you're giving birth!



1. Before you stretch, make sure your weight is equally spread across your bottom
2. Starting from your left side, move your left hand upwards and then bend to the right while looking straight forward
3. Breathe deeply into the stretch, hold it for two seconds and return to the starting position
4. Repeat for your right side



A variation of the side stretch that Jacqueline recommends for pregnant mothers includes a rotation, which trains the shoulders for the future, when you'll be carrying your baby.

1. After you've reached up and stretched to the side, move your shoulder on the side of the stretch forward and slightly down (i.e. if you're stretching your left side, move your left shoulder forward)
2. You'll feel the stretch at your rotator cuff, great relief for shoulders that are continually hunched at the desk

## ROTATOR CUFF EXTERNAL ROTATION

Another great exercise to loosen those hunched shoulders and make them stronger for carrying babies is the rotator cuff external rotation movement. Although this can be done without any exercise tools, Jacqueline recommends using a resistance band (pictured), which adds, as the name implies, more resistance and gives you more of a workout. This is another great exercise that can be done when you're sitting on your office chair.



1. Before starting, ensure your weight is spread evenly across your bottom, then pull on the resistance band apart with your hands until just slightly lesser than shoulder-width apart
2. Make sure your neck muscles are also relaxed
3. Maintaining the distance between your two hands, move the band upwards and above your head, then going down behind your back
4. Stop the band just below your neck at the shoulder blades



5. Hold for two seconds before going back in the opposite direction you came from to return to the starting position
6. This exercise opens up your chest and works the deltoids, one of the muscles that will be heavily used when you're carrying your newborn

### RULES AND GUIDELINES

Exercising while pregnant is generally safe and even recommended by doctors. However, here are a few rules and guidelines that you should bear in mind while beginning any physical activity. Also, as always, check with your physician or gynaecologist when you're unsure about your exercise routine.

- As a general rule, you should be able to carry a conversation while exercising
- Always drink water before, during and after any exercise routine
- Before exercising, empty your bladder as the increased pressure might cause urine leakages
- Avoid using your heart rate to measure the intensity of your exercise