



BODY CONCEPTIONS' SECRETS TO PRENATAL FITNESS AND BUSTING THE BIGGEST MYTHS:

Understanding your unique pregnancy and the essential principles you should know about prenatal exercise for safer and easier pregnancy, delivery, and postpartum recovery.

INTRODUCTION

We decided to create this handbook after realizing how many women do not get the information they need to feel safe, informed, and confident while exercising during their pregnancy. It can be scary, especially, if you're pregnant for the first time and don't know what could help or hurt you or your baby!

Doctors can give you general information, but that doesn't always help. After all, you are a unique person with your own unique physiology and response to your pregnancy. Some things that feel great to you might not work for others, and you also have your own personal history with exercise. As a company, Body Conceptions specializes in understanding general principles of pregnancy and fitness while also honoring and accommodating the differences between each individual body.

WHO WE ARE: MAHRI RELIN AND JULIA NETO OF BODY CONCEPTIONS BY MAHRI



Mahri Relin (Owner/Operator)

As a former professional dancer, Mahri Relin spent 12 years dancing around the world. It was through dancing that Mahri discovered her passion for fitness. She worked for some of the most prominent fitness studios in NYC, and it was her extensive experience in the industry that led her to realize that there were big gaps in fitness solutions for women going through their most significant life events and changes - especially during and after pregnancy!

Mahri is a NASM Certified Personal Trainer, Corrective Exercise Specialist, AFPA Pre and Postnatal Exercise Specialist, CES Certified Postnatal Corrective Exercise Specialist, and Certified Wellness and Nutrition Consultant, and she holds a masters in Clinical Psychology. She created her dance-inspired Body Conceptions fitness method through detailed research in and out of the studio, informed by the most current research in fitness and physical therapy. Mahri and all of her highly skilled and certified trainers devote themselves to providing women with the most intelligent, personalized, and joyful fitness experience possible. They are thrilled to share their knowledge and help women whenever they can!



Julia Neto (Training Director, NYC Regional Manager)

After graduating from Hofstra University with a BA in Dance, Julia began working with Body Conceptions by Mahri and has grown to become a leader in the company in just five years. She is a NASM Certified Personal Trainer, an IFPA Pre and Post Natal Specialist, a CES Postnatal Corrective Exercise Specialist, and she is currently in the process of becoming a NASM Certified Nutrition Coach. Her work as a professional dancer in NYC has also greatly informed her understanding of the human body.

Over the past five years, Julia has trained almost all of Body Conceptions' current trainers and has led the company's continuing education in pre and postnatal fitness. She has also personally trained countless women through delicate times such as pregnancy, postpartum recovery, IVF, and more. It is her passion and her honor to guide women to feel stronger, safer, more informed, and more confident in every phase of their lives.

We have created this handbook so that YOU can understand your pregnancy journey better and feel more comfortable navigating your exercise through each trimester. We hope it relieves your stress and provides you with a roadmap to enjoyable and successful prenatal exercise!

Here's what we have included for you. Sit back, and enjoy.

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P.S. Just to clarify, there are specific conditions and populations with specialized fitness needs that are not addressed in this handbook. Also, we are not generally telling you to ignore your doctor!! It's likely that anything your doctor tells you about exercise is informed by their expert knowledge about YOU and your body. We want you to listen to your doctor, and we think you should always clear your exercise plan with them first. This handbook supplements any information you have not gotten, and it's here to help you feel more informed and less anxious about your exercise. If anything we have written here conflicts with your doctor, feel free to ask them and clarify.



SOME OF THE BIGGEST PRENATAL FITNESS MYTHS

- I shouldn't start any new exercise after I become pregnant
- I shouldn't jump up and down while I'm pregnant
- Twisting during pregnancy is bad for me
- I shouldn't ever lie on my back during my pregnancy
- I should keep my heart rate below 140 when I exercise
- My exercise in general shouldn't be intense --
I should be gentle for the sake of my baby!
- It's not safe to do core exercises during my pregnancy
- My body sometimes feels weird when I do a certain exercise,
but it's ok to do it as long as I don't feel pain
- I won't necessarily know if something is wrong with the way
I'm exercising. That's what the experts are for!

Some of these myths are completely incorrect, and others are partial truths with more to understand. Read on, and find out what you should really know in each stage of your pregnancy....



GENERAL PRINCIPLES YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT PREGNANCY AND EXERCISE BY TRIMESTER

FIRST TRIMESTER

- **Listen to your body.**

During the first trimester, you are apt to feel profoundly tired and to experience morning sickness. You are also increasing your blood volume to supply the placenta and fetal circulation, so your heart pumps faster and stronger. Exercise can be a great tool to relieve low-level nausea and fatigue, however pay attention to what your body tells you. Some women don't feel up to exercise at this point, and you should give yourself lots of grace if this is the case for you.

- **Starting new exercise is not always bad for you..**

Women are often told not to start new kinds of exercise when they're pregnant. A lot of this is because the relaxin in your body can lead to greater risk of injury. (See more on relaxin below.) If you have not been exercising at all, it can actually be extremely helpful to start an exercise program that helps you maintain crucial strength and stamina throughout your pregnancy. Consider consulting with someone who knows what they're doing and can ramp up a program that is deliberate and safe.

- **Continue exercise if you've done it before - with caveats.**

If you exercised before, it's likely that you can keep going, possibly with modifications and extra attention to your body signals. *Here are some of the biggest fitness tips to consider from Day 1 of pregnancy:*

- If you exercised with lots of intensity before pregnancy, consider reducing your intensity and frequency, and try not to exercise at a caloric deficit if your body doesn't need it. You should feel energized from your workouts rather than depleted, and you should sleep better at night in response to the exercise rather than worse.
- Avoid stretching too deeply. As mentioned above, your body releases a hormone called relaxin that softens the ligaments in your pelvis and helps loosen and widen your cervix. It also loosens your ligaments and tendons throughout your body, which can mean that you find yourself more flexible than normal. However, it can also lead you to overstretch and injure yourself. Try to engage your muscles and move a bit more slowly in your stretches, and pay close attention to pain signals.
- Avoid exercise that puts pressure on your stomach or puts you in danger of getting hit in the stomach or falling such as contact sports, climbing/intense hiking or heavy strength training.
- Heart rate might not be the best indicator of your limits since heart rate in pregnancy spikes all the time. Instead, keep your workouts within the 5-8 range of a 10-point intensity scale. Make sure you can carry on a conversation and pay attention to how you feel after your workouts.
- Avoid deep twists that compress or cut off circulation to your uterus. An example is crossing your leg in front of you and then turning towards that bent knee in a twist, especially if you're pulling the knee into your chest. Other twists that keep your pelvis open can be healthy and tend to feel good during pregnancy. An example of a safe twist includes sitting crossed-legged, placing one hand on your opposite knee, and looking back to twist behind you. This twist keeps the pelvis open and unencumbered while still allowing the spine to rotate.
- Keep an eye on maternal heat, especially during the first trimester since your baby is going through important development. Do not take any heated fitness classes, and avoid workouts that cause you to overheat.

- Stay hydrated! Make sure you drink plenty of water before, during, and after a workout, and hydrate more if you're exercising on a warm day or in a drier climate.

- **Golden exercise tip: Start focusing on "umbrella breathing!"**

Many of us breathe shallowly in our chest and lift our shoulders when we inhale. This can cause tension and even pain in the neck and shoulders, and it can also make you feel stressed. Proper "umbrella" breathing - also called "360" breathing - looks and feels like an umbrella. The shoulders stay still and relaxed and you breathe out to all sides in your ribcage, including your back. Try this while looking into a mirror to make sure you don't lift your shoulders, and place your hands around your lower ribcage to feel the breath coming into all sides of your hands. This breathing is KEY in pregnancy and postnatal healing.

SECOND TRIMESTER

- **There is a lot of growth and change.**

In your second trimester, your uterus expands, and you start to show a larger bump. Your baby begins growing larger and stronger, and you'll start to feel it moving.

- **You have more energy.**

The great thing about the second trimester is that most women have more energy on average, and they often enjoy exercise more than before. At this stage, you need to pay very close attention to what feels good and what doesn't. Things might literally change from week to week, and you might need to change the focus of the workouts accordingly.

- **Be careful lying on your back.**

Around 19-20 weeks, begin to watch out for nausea and lightheadedness when lying on the back. The weight of the placenta can put pressure on the inferior vena cava and restrict fetal blood supply. You will notice nausea or lightheadedness when this occurs and you should know immediately that something is off. This does not affect all women, but to be safe it may be best to avoid lying flat on the back during workouts, to keep it brief, or to use a small pilates ball or foam roller under the back to elevate you and alleviate the pressure on the artery.

- **Your posture changes, which might make you more susceptible to pain.**

Your pelvis starts to shift forward, and your center of gravity also starts to shift forward. You might feel some lower back aches, and you might start noticing certain parts of your body getting tighter like your inner thighs/adductors and even the front of your shoulders as they shift back and hunch a bit in response to shifts in your pelvis. Your upper back and neck/upper shoulders might also feel tight or painful with this hunching. You might also feel sharp pains in your lower abdomen (that usually go away quickly) when you stand up suddenly, and you might also find yourself start to waddle from side to side as you walk. All of your postural changes can put extra stress on your joints and spine. Also, parts of your body that are strong tend to take over for the parts of the body that weaken, which can potentially lead to pain and injury and even greater changes in posture.

- **The good news: Changes in your posture don't have to cause you pain!! Focusing on proper form and building strength in your exercise is key!**

Proper form and strength in the lower body will support your growing and changing body, help your lower back and counteract any tendencies to "waddle" that can overly stress your joints. You might find yourself relying on your arm strength more and more (to get out of chairs and beds for example - or picking up other small children), so arm exercises with light dumbbells or resistance bands are also a must for a strength workout. These exercises should also be designed to counteract the natural tendency at this stage to round your shoulders forward.

- **Keep your core strong.**

As your pelvis shifts forward and your belly continues to grow, it's extra important to strengthen your deep core muscles. These muscles help support your spine and take pressure off your back muscles that tend to tighten in response to the pelvic weight pulling forward. With greater abdominal strength, you can correct upper body posture and put less stress on the upper back, neck and shoulders.

- **Proper breathing is even more crucial.**

“Crowding” of the belly can cause your rib cage to push up and flare, and it can become harder to breathe. Breathing up into your shoulders can cause even more stress and tightening in your upper neck and back and even contribute to pelvic floor issues at this stage. Remember your umbrella breathing!! It will help prevent upper body tightness, increase lung capacity, and help you relax and center yourself.

- **Golden exercise tip: Coordinate your breathing with pelvic floor “reverse kegels” and deep core engagement.**

As the belly starts to grow, it’s more important than ever to manage your intra-abdominal pressure. This can be done by coordinating your umbrella breathing with “reverse kegels” - or relaxing in the pelvic floor on the inhale, and you can also coordinate this process with deep core engagement as well. Try this: Breathe into all sides of your ribcage while allowing your pelvic floor to relax down on the inhale. On the exhale, make an “SSS” sound while pulling your low abs into your spine, and allow your pelvic floor to return back to neutral.

THIRD TRIMESTER

- **Your baby continues growing in size and weight while its body systems finish maturing.**

This is a time that might start to feel uncomfortable as the crowding of pregnancy can lead to heartburn, abdominal achiness, decreased lung capacity, sleep deprivation, and lack of bladder control. You might also experience Braxton Hicks contractions.

- **Pubic symphysis pain and SI joint pain are common in this trimester, as the pelvis continues to stretch and the ligaments are pulled.**

Both of these issues can be helped by avoiding exercises that ask you to stand on one leg or move with an asymmetrical pelvis. If the pain persists, it could be really helpful to see a pelvic floor physical therapist.

- **Manage pressure.**

As intra-abdominal pressure increases, be on the lookout for stress in the body. If you notice coning or bulging in your abdominal work, try a simpler movement with less stress on the tissues, and really tap into your breath. Avoid any movements that cause a feeling of heaviness in the pelvis.

- **Honor your uniqueness.**

Exercise during the third trimester should be focused on navigating your unique experience. We find that different women tolerate different positions and exercises depending on where they're carrying their baby and how their posture has changed, and this can continue to change until the baby moves into its final position. It's also very important to pay attention to the way you feel each day since you might get more sleep on some days than others.

- **This is time to prepare for labor.**

Preparing the body for labor can take a number of different forms. Some of the most effective exercises involve low-impact routines such as deep squats and rock-backs on hands and knees that stretch and release the glutes while expanding the pelvic floor. It's also important for you at this stage to have a strong core and overall strength and stamina, which will be required during the labor process. To address this, thigh, hip, and glute strengthening exercises are key with more coordinated breathing and deep core work. Your body might continue to feel extra tight in some places, so stretching can be a wonderful relief as well.

- **Golden exercise tip: Open, stretch, and relax your pelvic floor (and glutes!)**

In the last few weeks of the last trimester it is important to prep for birth by getting the pelvic floor to relax - do deep breathing with less focus on the kegel and more on relaxing and spreading the pelvic floor on the inhale. Do deep squats and yoga-inspired stretches like child's pose, cat-cow, and "happy baby" to persuade the area to relax. Meditation and hydration are also very helpful tools during this time.



DOES EVERY PREGNANCY LOOK THE SAME? HOW DO I FIT INTO THIS AS A UNIQUE INDIVIDUAL?

One of the most confusing experiences during and after pregnancy is wondering where you fit in. Despite all of these general principles, you can have an experience that feels very different. Maybe you have some unusual aches and pains, or maybe you have a lifestyle that leaves you worried about how to make sense of all of this information. Or maybe you're just generally nervous being pregnant for the first time.

You can understand the "averages" all you want, but your prenatal journey is guaranteed to be different in at least one or maybe numerous ways. It sounds over-simplified, but the key to understanding your own prenatal movement and fitness is listening to your body. Believe it or not, your body will tell you nearly everything you need to know, from what doesn't work for you in the midst of exercise to when and how you should change position to protect you and your baby (even while you're sleeping!), to just alerting you that something's going on that needs your attention. Trusting in these signals is a big part of navigating your pregnancy without stress, and it also helps a fitness professional who is working with you guide you more safely and successfully through your fitness journey. Even if something you're doing just feels "weird," change direction and try something else!

**So with all of this information, how do you decide what to do?
Where do you go from here to get things started?**



Photo: Corey Rives

WHAT IS “RIGHT” FOR ME ANYWAY?

Honestly, everyone is different. Consider really thinking about what you love. Do something that feels good to your body and that reduces stress, and consider choosing a studio, company, or trainer that understands pregnancy inside and out if you are worried or are pregnant for the first time. Also, word of mouth is invaluable. Reach out to friends who have been pregnant before and find out where/how they exercised. You might find some amazing resources in your community that you didn't know existed.

WHAT IF I KNOW I HAVE TO MODIFY MY EXERCISE BUT DON'T QUITE KNOW HOW?

It's honestly not a clear-cut formula. Your fitness history will be a big factor, and sometimes tolerance to exercise will depend on your unique body's response to the hormonal and postural changes you experience. Here are a few important things to remember:

- **Try to remove the danger of impact to your abdomen and avoid terrain that could be dangerous/ cause slipping or tripping easily.**
- **We can't tell you enough, you will know what feels right and wrong - and don't be afraid to try different options. Back away from anything that feels uncomfortable, painful, too intense or extremely exhausting. Consider shorter periods of cardio combined with muscular work or stick with sculpting only, and try to avoid full-body, intense power movements (like burpees for example) since your joints and ligaments won't be able to support you as readily. Also, be open to changing your exercise as you change during the pregnancy.**
- **If you're taking a fitness class and don't feel good in an exercise (and don't know how to modify), it's always a good choice to stop what you're doing and try something completely different that you know feels better. For example, feel free to drop into a position like child's pose and stay there until the next exercise that works for you.**
- **Prenatal specialists are trained to know how to give you alternative options. Consider consulting with an expert, even just to get you going in the right direction.**

WHAT IF I FEEL TOO TIRED TO EXERCISE? SHOULD I JUST SKIP IT?

It's extremely important to pay attention to your body of course (and sleep disruption can be a major source of fatigue as you go along). However, exercise can also give you much-needed energy when you're dragging and change the course of your entire day. Don't exercise if you're profoundly tired, but if you're just mildly dragging consider moving around for at least 10-15 minutes. Don't overdo it, but larger muscular movements (like squats or lunges) or walking and gentle cardio can be the perfect solution to fatigue. Scheduling exercise with a trainer or a friend can also help keep you going, and they will understand if you need to change things a bit to accommodate your fatigue.



LOOKING BACK -- THE PRENATAL FITNESS MYTHS BUSTED!

We have technically addressed all of the myths you read at the beginning of this handbook, but let's circle back and officially bust each one. **Ready? Set...!**

- **I shouldn't start any new exercise after I become pregnant.**

As long as you are careful and intentional, you can definitely start something new (or even start exercising after many years of no exercise).

- **I shouldn't jump up and down while I'm pregnant.**

Wrong! Some people love jumping until the very end. Some believe that jumping weakens the pelvic floor, but we have seen the opposite. You will know if you are one of those people who likes to jump :) Whatever feels wonderful that you love and crave is likely just fine for you. Ask an expert if you're still not sure.

- **Twisting during pregnancy is bad for me.**

Deep twists that compress the belly are not recommended, but less intense twists that keep the pelvis open can feel wonderful. Try moving through your twists more slowly and with less intensity if necessary, and you'll know if something doesn't feel good to you.

- **I shouldn't ever lie on my back during my pregnancy.**

This is usually not a big concern until weeks 19-20, and even then some women feel fine on their back for a while if not the whole pregnancy. To be safe, consider elevating your pelvis or putting a small ball behind your back to avoid any issues. And pay attention to any signs of dizziness!

- I should keep my heart rate below 140 when I exercise.**
 Instead of heart rate, pay attention to your perception of exertion. On a scale of 1-10, how intense is your exercise? You can definitely work hard but try to stay between 5 and 8, and make sure you can still breathe and converse easily.
- My exercise in general shouldn't be intense -- I should be gentle for the sake of my baby!**
 This is one of the biggest myths we like to bust! You can definitely work hard as long as you feel amazing and don't feel destroyed by the exercise afterwards. Pay attention to the exertion guidelines, and you will benefit greatly - physically and emotionally - from challenging your body.
- It's not safe to do core exercises during my pregnancy.**
 To the contrary, core work is one of the most important elements of prenatal fitness. Your core supports everything you do. It will help protect you from pain and injury and will carry you through your labor, delivery, and postnatal recovery. Don't ever neglect it!
- My body sometimes feels weird when I do a certain exercise, but it's ok to do it as long as I don't feel pain.**
 Pain isn't the only indicator of an exercise that isn't working. Some women describe the feeling in this situation as "weird" or uncomfortable. Don't worry, you will recognize these signals. Just don't ignore your body!
- I won't necessarily know if something is wrong with the way I'm exercising. That's what the experts are for!**
 Believe it or not, your body can be smarter than the fitness "experts." They know general prenatal principles, but every pregnancy is different. AND you will certainly know what works and what doesn't. Don't let anyone convince you that something works when you know it doesn't. Honor yourself and your body, and you will feel more empowered throughout your whole pregnancy as a result.

Hopefully all of these tips, benchmarks, and busted myths have given you greater confidence moving forward in your prenatal journey. We have been in the pre/postnatal fitness space for more than a decade, and there is new information that comes out all the time. Still have questions?? We have added a section here discussing some of the common additional questions we have gotten over the years that we didn't address already. Send us more if they come up for you. We are always looking for ways to help you!



EXTRA FAQ'S (FOR THE LITTLE THINGS WE DIDN'T COVER)

- **Can I do planks while I am pregnant?**

Yes! And no. As we discussed earlier, this one is all about listening to your body and managing intra-abdominal pressure. Early on, planks are a great way to strengthen the transverse abdominis (TVA; corset-shaped deep core muscles) and keep your joints strong. However, as the pregnancy progresses and the belly grows, it's important to keep an eye on the stress going onto the linea alba, or the connective tissue down the center of the core. If you can exhale and keep your TVA engaged, meaning you are pulling the belly up and in and supporting the weight of the baby with your core, you are good to go. BUT, if you notice any bulging or coning, feel any pulling, or just feel like planks are too intense for you, it's time to ease off. Start paying extra close attention to how your core is working during planks about halfway through the pregnancy. Generally, you'll know when it no longer is working for you. Modified planks with knees on the ground, or elevated planks on a bench or chair are great alternatives.

- **What is a diastasis and how do I prevent getting it?**

Diastasis refers to the lingering separation of the rectus abdominis muscle along the connective tissue, or linea alba, in the center of the core. This may lead to belly bulging or coning (as described above), often at its worst at the belly button. This tissue is where the majority of stretching takes place at the end of pregnancy, but not everyone's muscles snap back together so quickly after birth. The first thing to understand when it comes to diastasis is it's not always preventable. Causes of diastasis can range from hereditary factors, to the size and shape of the belly, to the birthing experience you have, to poorly managed intra abdominal pressure. However, there are a lot of things you can do right during pregnancy to help mitigate the effects, and support a quicker recovery if you do end up with an abdominal separation. Focus on umbrella breathing, and coordinating the pelvic floor with your breath. Watch out for any exercises that cause coning, and back off immediately if you notice it happening. Keep the TVA muscle strong so it can support the weight of your belly and prevent excess stretching. If you have had a diastasis in the past, or still have one going into your pregnancy, it could be wise to consult with a PT or fitness professional who is trained in this work for more specific advice.

- **How do I know if I am kegeling properly?**

A common contributor to pelvic floor dysfunction is that women think they understand how to kegel but are not engaging the muscles fully or properly. Even if you think you know the basics of kegeling, try this: Sit on a yoga ball if you have one, if not a chair will work. Tip your pelvis forward so your pubic bone area is in contact with the ball or chair, then engage as if you are trying to stop the flow of urine. Get comfortable with this activation. Then do the opposite, rolling your pelvis back so that your tailbone is touching the ball or chair, then contract as if you are stopping gas. Come back to neutral and try to engage the front and back half simultaneously, without gripping your glutes. It should feel like a tenting feeling, or a flower closing. Try to coordinate that action with your exhale, and on your inhale relax and spread that area like a flower opening. That is a proper kegel! If you are still having trouble and feel as if you are not engaging correctly, consult a pelvic floor PT who can assess your functioning. Remember, pelvic floor function is key to preventing pressure related issues like leaking, diastasis, and prolapse!

- **What if I need bed rest? Will all my efforts to stay fit be ruined?**

No way! Any foundation you have built is helpful, and there is so much you can do before and after giving birth to help you recover and rebuild your muscles the right way. Focus on your safety and the safety of your baby, and know that there are SO many more resources than ever before designed to help you once you are ready to move and exercise again.

- **My exercise was going well for a while, but I'm now starting to feel aches and pains in my body that are new to me in my daily life. Will exercise help or hurt me? Should I stop altogether until I feel better?**

In general, exercise can be really beneficial to prevent and mitigate typical aches and pains. It is very normal to experience these pains as your pregnancy progresses, and they definitely do not mean you have to stop exercising altogether. What may be counterintuitive is knowing that strengthening your muscles, rather than stretching them, is often the solution. Keeping the muscles around your joints and around your growing belly strong will help reduce pressure on the joints, tendons, and ligaments, and in turn decrease the likelihood of pain. In some cases, stopping your exercise routine could cause the aches and pains to intensify! With that being said, there is no need to push through acute pain during your workouts. Try to be creative and test out different exercises until you find one that doesn't aggravate anything. Again, listen to your body: any intense or abnormal pain should be honored with rest and potentially attention from a physical therapist or another medical professional.

TRY OUR BODY CONCEPTIONS PRENATAL WORKOUT!

Want a taste of Body Conceptions' prenatal approach to fitness? Try our 25-minute workout! All you need is a mat, 2-lb weights or water bottles, and sneakers. This workout is appropriate up to early third trimester, but everyone responds differently. Back off anything that feels uncomfortable, and make sure you're cleared to exercise.

We believe that exercise should be challenging but joyful. Enjoy the music, feel free to add your own flair, and have fun!!.

**Check out our accompanying email for the link to our workout
(the password is **BOCOPRENATAL**)**

For more ways to work out with Body Conceptions, contact admin@bodyconceptions.com, and check us out at www.bodyconceptions.com