

Core training during Pregnancy

Training your core during pregnancy can be understandably confusing, do you or don't you?... You do, but you do the correct exercises, targeting the correct muscles of the core system and modify to suit your stage of pregnancy, and then again post birth you gradually and gently retrain your core back to its foundational strength with the right deep core strengthening exercises.

So, the deep core muscles that need your attention are:

- Your pelvic floor (it is important to focus on correctly activating AND relaxing these muscles) for correct function, control and support of your abdominal organs
- Your Transverse abdominals
- Your diaphragm at the top of your core which is your breathing muscle, so get the breath involved in your core training
- And your multifidus muscles in your back

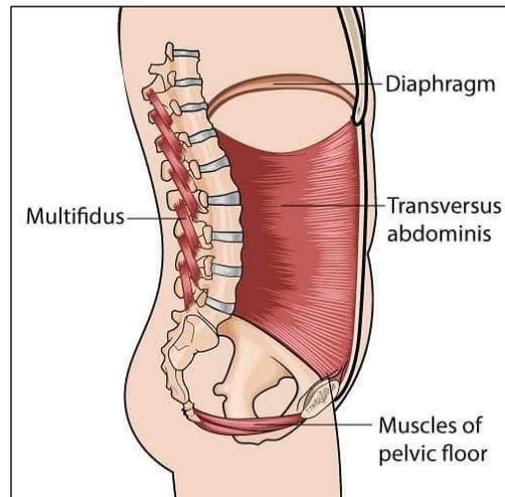


Figure 1: These photos from pelvic health physical therapist, Julie Wiebe.

Think of your core like a balloon or a canister, if pressure is placed on one side (ie breathing down with your diaphragm) it must be dispersed to the rest of your core evenly. Your core is the foundation of your all your body's movements, and obviously this is compromised during

pregnancy due to your growing baby.

Continuing to engage and connect with your core and strengthen your deep core muscles will help counteract this. During pregnancy it is recommended that you temporarily avoid 'traditional ab exercises' such as plank, crunches and sit-ups as these create excessive intra-abdominal pressure which can cause long term detrimental effects on your core and pelvic floor. Instead stick to pregnancy safe core activation methods to see you through, and

continue to use similar methods postnatally as you are recovering to rebuild your core foundation.

At the centre of these pregnancy and postnatal safe core activation exercises is the [core connection breath](#). At the top of your core is your diaphragm, a large muscle directly related to your breathing, incorporating your core activation exercises with your breathing to balance the intra-abdominal pressure is essential to reduce the risk of worsened abdominal separation and pelvic floor dysfunction.

More about the abdominal separation (AKA Diastasis recti): This is a naturally occurring process that occurs in almost all pregnancies towards the end where the two muscle bellies separate apart and the connective tissues called 'linea alba' that connects them becomes thin and has less tension (a bit like a pair of stockings when you stretch them). To ensure you don't make your separation worse ensure you are modifying and monitoring your exercises to ensure you are not creating too much intra-abdominal pressure which will put pressure on this weaker area and make it worse. Following along with my Energise your Pregnancy program trimester specific guidelines will guide you with the right modifications. The good news is, this separation often naturally reduces itself post birth, but sometimes it doesn't so some extra focused exercises maybe needed which are included in my Re-energised Postnatal Recovery Program.

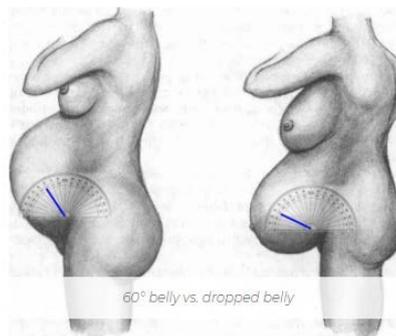
Here are a couple of pregnancy safe core exercises to get you started:

[Core connection breath](#) – towards the end of you pregnancy you will want to start focusing more on the relaxation of your pelvic floor rather than the activation to help prepare and lengthen your pelvic floor muscles for birth. Continue to work on your core connection and deep transverse muscle activation however as strength in these muscles will help you push your baby out.

[Incline slow mountain climber](#) – as your pregnancy progresses, raise the height of the incline, starting from the floor/step height in the first trimester, chair-table height in the second trimester and table/kitchen bench to against the wall flat footed in your third trimester. Perform 6-8 reps/side for 2-3 sets in your exercise program.

There are so many wonderful benefits of training your core during pregnancy;

- Having strong core muscles during pregnancy can help improve the position of your baby during pregnancy and for birth
- Fewer aches and pains to keep you moving freely as you will have a good core foundation to support your changing posture and movements
- Improved and supported posture
- Effective breathing for labour and stress management
- Reduce abdominal separation (diastasis recti)
- Improved pelvic floor function
- Improved labour, birth and recovery
- Improved overall body confidence



Myth busters:

1. Please don't constantly hold your abs tight throughout the day thinking this will make your tummy look smaller or work your abs...it won't. In fact it places increased pressure in other places such as your pelvic floor, it can negatively affect how you breathe, not allowing your lungs and diaphragm to fully expand and contract and can increase tension in your upper back, shoulders and neck. Think of your belly as an inflated balloon, squeezing it in the middle pushes pressure out the top and bottom.... Get the idea? See balloon picture above.
2. As already discussed front planks, press-ups and other front loaded positions: please consider how these will affect your abdominal separation in the mid to later stages of pregnancy. You will likely feel your belly is unsupported and gravity pulling down on your belly hanging towards the ground. Instead modify by performing with your arms up on an incline (the further you are along the higher you need to be) for short 5-10 second holds and re-setting for two – three sets.
3. Kegals: yes you should do pelvic floor exercises, but they shouldn't be isolated to just tightening and contracting. It is just as important to relax and lengthen your pelvic floor to ensure you can get an effective contraction when you need it. Often pelvic floor exercises aren't performed correctly; sometimes women are actually bearing down rather than drawing in and upward gently. If you are in doubt, check in with a pelvic floor physio for an assessment and guidance.

Combine your pelvic floor exercises with your breathing, core and floor connection, remembering to use the [core connection breath](#).