



Episode 4: Pure Body

w/ Rebecca Liberatore (Melbourne Pregnancy + Pelvic Floor Physiotherapy)

Pure Body

Exercising safely during pregnancy.

Tiffaney: Hi everyone, our guest today is Rebecca Liberatore from Melbourne Pregnancy and Pelvic Floor Physiotherapy. Rebecca is a senior pelvic floor physiotherapist with more than 10 years' experience under her belt and is the Co-director of MPPP. She's also a mother of two boys. Today will be discussing how to look after your body during pregnancy, birth, and post-birth. Hi Bec, thanks for joining me today.

Rebecca: Thanks for having me, Tiff.

Tiffaney: I'm looking forward to our chat. Having three children myself now and knowing a whole lot more about what to do during pregnancy, birth, and beyond I feel so much more educated, however my days of having babies are definitely over having teenagers now! I wish I'd known more about what I know now before I had my first actually, because I think there was a lot of things, I just didn't have any idea about. So, the fact that you had your qualifications before you had your kids must have been a massive help to you, Bec?

Rebecca: Yeah it definitely was a huge help, but it's also worked the other way around, in that I think it's made me a much better Women's Health Physio, having first-hand experience being pregnant and post-natal.

Tiffaney: Yeah, lucky you! I'm looking forward to hearing some tools and tips from both a mothers and physiotherapist perspective today.

Rebecca: Yeah, great. I'm looking forward to it too

Tiffaney: OK so, Bec, I think what would be great to start with is some commonly asked questions that you get from people who, I guess first find out there pregnant, because I think when you first find out there's typically going to be things that people ask and it's great to know what those commonly asked questions are. So, if you could take us through some of those that would be great.



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Rebecca: Definitely. One of the most commonly asked questions is, “can I continue to exercise during pregnancy?” And fortunately, the answer is yes. Exercise during pregnancy has been shown to have numerous emotional and physical health benefits for both mum and baby. Many women want to continue their exercise regime during pregnancy but are worried or confused about what kind or amount of exercise is considered safe.

For most healthy pregnant women who exercise pre-pregnancy, a moderate intensity exercise programme can be safely continued. It’s always a good idea to discuss your pregnancy exercise routine with a specialist, such as a Women’s Health Physio, or your maternity caregiver such as your GP, or your obstetrician, or your midwife - especially if you have any high-risk conditions or pregnancy complications.

Tiffany: Yeah, I think this is definitely a great question to answer today, because you know there’s so many things out there and I’ve been asked as a PT myself actually, this sort of question over time. And I think before having my first baby, I would have liked to have known a bit more about what I could and couldn’t do during pregnancy, so this is great and

I’m sure all of the all listeners are thinking, “oh you’ve definitely got my attention now, Bec.” So, I think I’d love to ask more questions now, so could you take us through some of the most typical body changes that occur during pregnancy? Because I think this is another big thing that people need to understand, so they can really get their head around why pregnancy exercise is great, but also important to have some considerations.

Rebecca: Yeah, definitely. There are so many changes that your body goes through and the body really is amazing. So, the first one is probably your heart rate increases by 15 beats per minute, as more blood is directed to the uterus, the kidneys and the digestive systems. Your blood pressure will increase to ideally around 140 over 90. Expected weight gain is sort of as a general between 10 and 12 kilos over the nine months, but every person is different and we try not to focus so much on the numbers, but you know, in consultation with your maternity caregiver they will give you an idea of how you’re tracking.

Rebecca: (cont...) So, relaxin is a hormone that causes laxity of ligaments throughout the body and increases your joint range which is really important because you need joints that were previously quite stable - like the pelvis to stretch a little bit to allow that passage of the baby out. But relaxin usually peaks at about 12 weeks we now know, and sort of steadily decreases from there, but its effects are long after that 12-week peak. So, you can often get back and pelvic pain associated with that increasing relaxin your body due to that increased movement and that can be aggravated and or felt when you're doing activities like walking, getting in and out of the car, or rolling over in bed.

Another change which is I suppose quite obvious is the centre of mass shifts forward as your weight increases during pregnancy you become a sort of different shape, and this can reduce your stability and your walking pattern and cause your walking patterns to become a bit impaired. So, that results basically in an increased curve in your spine and some people already have quite a large curve in their spine, so it can definitely increase that further and the forward tilt of the pelvis and that can result in some lower back pain or some pelvic pain.

You often get connective tissue stretching around the stomach as a baby grows which can be quite uncomfortable and that's commonly known as round ligament pain, and the gluteal muscles, so the bum muscles, and the hamstring muscles, which are at the back of your legs, tighten as the load increases that it needs to support.

Finally during pregnancy, your abdominal muscle stretch and separate and this is something that people I think freak out about, but you need to understand that this is this is normal and it needs to happen for you to go from your pre-pregnancy size to fitting a fully grown baby. So, it should actually decrease over the first few months following birth, however we do recommend have been assessed by Women's Health Physio before returning to exercise at about six weeks, just to make sure that that that is all healing.

Tiffany: Yeah great, I think having a good understanding of some of those typical body changes that occur in every pregnancy is so vital, because you know knowing what's normal and what to expect can really help you to deal with those things, and then obviously understand when to get support when you need it.

Tiffany: (cont...) So, thanks for covering some of those great points, I think everyone will be really listening and taking that all in today. In your experience, how can exercise during pregnancy help you throughout your pregnancy and then even birth and post birth, do you feel?

Rebecca: Yeah, definitely. There are numerous benefits of remaining active and exercising throughout pregnancy. Definitely reduces fatigue, so I know in the first trimester it often can be really hard to motivate yourself to exercise especially towards the end, but it really can help to reduce that fatigue, so just trying to break that cycle and getting to exercise can be really important.

It can definitely help with reducing swelling in the limbs. Reducing stress, anxiety and depression, which is huge because we know that antenatal depression and anxiety increases your risk of post-natal depression and anxiety, so that's something we really want people to take on board and make sure they're exercising looking after their mental health.

Exercise can definitely prevent gestational diabetes and improve your sugar levels for the women that have gestational diabetes and can help with that nausea and vomiting, especially in that first trimester that you might be experiencing, and definitely prepare the body for the physical demands of labour.

Tiffany: Yeah, so what types of exercise do you generally recommend during pregnancy, Bec? And, what did you find most helpful during your pregnancy yourself? Because I think understanding what you may have found helpful can really give people some guide around why they would want to continue doing exercise during pregnancy for them.

Rebecca Yeah, definitely. I often get women asking me what form of exercise is the most beneficial to perform? And every woman is different and that's important to understand, and my recommendations are usually targeted to that individual. But generally, I would say you're looking for a combination of strength and cardio exercise, so that huff and puff type exercise, and you want to use a combination of activities that you enjoy.



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Rebecca: (cont...) So, I personally am a huge fan of the exercise bike, because I think exercise bike is a great way to keep your pelvic floor supported pre and post pregnancy, and as well as still getting that huff and puff and feeling that the big muscle groups working. But other suggestions could be swimming, yoga, Pilates, or walking. Also, the Royal Australian College of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, which is sort of the governing body for all things to do with Obs and Gynae, recommend pregnant women should aim to be physically active on most, but preferably all days of the week.

So, if you previously weren't exercising much at all, or if you are overweight, we recommend that maybe starting off with every second day, and then slowly building up. But you should be aiming for about 30 minutes a day at moderate intensity. And what is moderate intensity? Basically, you should be able to talk while you're exercising, not talk like we're talking now, Tiff, but be able to still get words out while you are exercising. And also, trying to do a combination of strength and aerobic exercise.

Tiffany: Yeah, so the talk test is really important that's one of the things I learnt as a PT, so I think understanding that is really good for people because it is hard to know what's moderate for me, so, yeah. Wow Bec, that was just so interesting and definitely things that I would have loved to know before having my first baby and going through my first pregnancy on my own. Obviously now I know a lot more but having someone like yourself is a specialist in this area really would have helped. So, what are some of the other important considerations if you're going to exercise during your pregnancy? Like the things that we want you really want to consider for safety.

Rebecca: Yeah, so women must take into account the changing state of pregnancy, and you're advised to stop exercising and seek medical opinion if you've got sort of any of the following: like chest pain, unexplained shortness of breath, dizziness or feeling faint, or having a headache, muscle weakness, calf pain, swelling or redness in that area, sudden swelling of your ankles, face or hands, obviously vaginal bleeding or any amniotic fluid loss, decreased foetal movements, uterine contractions or pain in the lower back pelvic area and abdomen.

Rebecca: (cont...) Consulting with a Women's Health Physio is probably the best way women can be provided with individual advice about the best form of exercise for them. Furthermore, I would always recommend women have their pelvic floor muscles checked in this appointment and be given a specific pelvic floor programme for them to work on during their pregnancy and build on.

And one other tip I would always say is make sure that you eat before exercising, at least 30 minutes before exercising - like a banana or something like that, because you can find that you get a little bit dizzy or dizzier than you would normally with exercise, so making sure you eat something before exercise is important and staying hydrated.

Tiffany: Yeah, great tips there. I think knowing too that it's really going to be individual is important to consider, you know, there isn't one rule for everyone, so understanding that is important to get some specialist help when it comes to exercising during pregnancy, if you think you've got any sort of issues you might need to be aware of, definitely. So, can you tell us a bit more about pelvic floor exercises and Kegels, because I know how important this is and I've definitely had some pelvic floor issues after having my three kids so I'd love you to talk us through a bit more about that today.

Rebecca: Yeah, definitely, and being a pelvic floor physio it's obviously an area I'm very, very passionate about. So, the pelvic floor muscles are a big, sling like muscle that lines that inside of the pelvis. It's literally the floor to your pelvis and so that sort of gives you an idea of its main role which is to support the pelvic organs that sit above it, that being the bladder, the bowel and the uterus. So, it also wraps around the front, the middle, and the back passages, so it helps to control the bladder and the bowel as well.

Pregnancy puts all women at risk of incontinence, so the leakage of urine due to weakening of these muscles under the load of the baby. So, typical signs of signs and symptoms of a pelvic floor that isn't working efficiently is, leakage of urine, so that might be when your coughing and or sneezing, or laughing, or jumping, or running. Rushing to the toilet, and you may not even get there on time for urine or for your bowels, difficulty controlling that wind, pelvic heaviness or dragging or pain, or pain with intercourse or lack of sensation or inability to achieve orgasm with sex.

Rebecca: (cont...) So, if you think about those signs and symptoms if things aren't working correctly - it's a pretty important muscle and it deserves a bit of time and effort being put into it. So, we know unfortunately that about 50% of people are doing their pelvic floor exercises incorrectly, so again, individual assessment is really paramount to make sure that you are doing the right thing. Because if you're spending that time working on these muscles, you want to make sure that you're doing the right thing and they're being effective.

Tiffany: Yeah, absolutely. And you know, as I said before I didn't know much about pelvic floor exercises and I think I've definitely had some issues over the years and I would have liked to have had those corrected or know bit more about it beforehand, and the fact that it's a muscle you can't see could be really hard to work on, and you know, so all this stuff really insightful and I think knowing a bit more about the in depth reason to do these types of exercises and why they're important is really great.

So, what are some of the other general health and well-being tips you would give most of your clients? And what did you feel helped you most during your pregnancy with regards to keeping yourself well in general overall?

Rebecca: Yeah, so I would say exercises really important. So, keeping your body fit but your mind fit and your mind healthy as well. Obviously doing pelvic floor exercises and I think that obviously goes without saying that they're really important, but also having good bladder and bowel habits so making sure you're drinking plenty of fluids, so sort of 1.5 to 2 litres of fluid a day, mainly water ideally.

Avoiding constipation and straining through eating plenty of high fibre foods such as fruit and vegetables. I'm a huge fan and anyone that has probably had a consult with me, or my colleagues will know that I do love recommending All Bran Original to people. I'm not sponsored by them, but it does have 44% of your daily fibre intake compared to other cereals which have, I think the next closest cereal has about 20%.



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Rebecca: (cont...) So getting a real high dose of fibre in each morning I think can set you up to make sure you have really good bowel habits and that can make a big difference to your pelvic floor, but you know your bowel health as well, and just make you feel a lot better if your bowels are regular and we know that it's quite common to get constipated during pregnancy. So, definitely exercise, pelvic floor, and keeping those bowels moving.

Tiffany: Yeah, great I love those tips and so simply it's so important so I think it's great to cover some of the basics that people really think you should know these things but really when it comes down to, it's so easy to forget the basics in life.

Rebecca: Yeah, for sure.

Tiffany: So, what are some tips about how to look after your body during birth? Because I think again, the birth is a big thing everyone focuses on, and we all want to know how can we support ourselves during that?

Rebecca: Yeah, so I think movement is the key to labour. So, I personally base my recommendations on a book called Active Birth Skills by Juju Sundin, and that's been around for many, many years. He is a physio. We've actually done a recent IGTV post about this so feel free to check that out of our Insta page @melbourne_pelvicfloor_physio.

We just sort of go through some practical and easy tips that can help manage your pain during labour by keeping active. So, trying to keep upright and walking around during your labour. I also love Tens Machines. So, for those that don't know, a Tens Machine has little electrodes that you put on your back. Basically, what they do is they are sort of like a distraction - they put another sensation into your body that's not painful at a time when you often are feeling quite a lot of pain.

I sort of explain it to people like if you bang your elbow on a desk and then you automatically start rubbing it, the reason you start rubbing it is because when you bang your elbow you feel pain, so you start rubbing it to put another sensation in there that's not pain so your body is not just feeling pain it's got other sensations going in and it sort of minimises that pain.

Rebecca: (cont...) So, Tens Machine can be a really effective input that you can be using and a good tool to have in your tool bag for when you go into labour. But other things like heat packs, getting your partner to do some massage, using stress balls to help squeeze, and music can be really good tools to help deal with the pain positively.

Tiffany: Yeah, great. I think being able to stay, you know, focused during that period and to have some things that you can do to also distract yourself is great and I think all the listeners out there are really taking those tips on.

So, what are some other hot tips to consider immediately after birth? Because I think after birth, again is a massive topic and a lot of people really need to know about some things that they can do to help look after themselves straight after.

Rebecca: Yeah, for sure. So, gentle movement and early walking is really important in the absence of medical complications of course. So, remembering to log roll when you get out of bed, just like you would towards the end of pregnancy. So, rolling to the side and sitting up rather than sitting up straight in bed. Ensuring that you're getting 2 hours of horizontal rest each day for the first six weeks post birth. This is aside from sleeping at night.

Using ice packs I think it's great - inside your pad for 20 minutes every two hours until the pain and swelling has ceased, and never put ice directly on your skin, because apart from everything else you do not want ice burn. Wearing firm, supportive underwear or shapewear can help to gently compress that perineum, so, the area that is often quite swollen after you have a baby and it could also help to support the abdominal muscles, and also your abdominal, your scar if you've had a caesarean section.

Tiffany: These considerations are really important I think and to be aware of. An ice pack is such a great suggestion, they have been recommended by a few of our guest speakers actually, so obviously it's one of those things it's definitely recommended by ice. I think using ice and heat just throughout any area of discomfort is great, because obviously like you said, it's something you can do that's not a medicine or pharmaceutical that you can add to your body, it's something natural that can help support you - so I'm all for that.

Tiffaney: (cont...) What would you recommend to pack in your hospital bag to assist with post birth recovery, Bec? Because again, I think it's great to have some things that you can think about putting in your hospital bag that are going to support you that might not necessarily be at the hospital that you might really want to consider having. So, could you take us through some of those recommendations?

Rebecca: Yeah, definitely. There are a few main ones I'd recommend that you definitely need or want to have in your hospital bag. So, first of all probably some firm, cotton underwear. So, particularly after a vaginal birth you want these to provide gentle support to the perineal area while, holding a pad and an ice pack in place. So, when considering your size go for something firm, not baggy, one to two sizes sort of up from your pre-pregnancy size is a good estimate, and a little hint is buy bulk pack in black from a department store which are cheap and wash easy and can be thrown out if required, because postpartum bleeding can be quite heavy especially in those early stages.

Then, you want something that's a little bit more supportive than just the underwear which would be something like a pair of recovery shorts. So, whether you've had a vaginal birth or a caesarean section, your recovery wear can be used from the first few days after birth, as soon as it feels comfortable. So, in early stages these provide a great support over the stitches and swollen areas to ease pain and facilitate movement.

We personally recommend Solidea recovery shorts, there are quite a few on the market but we find that these are quite light and breathable - especially in Summer and will often provide a free fitting in our clinic for patients that are interested in those. And, as you mentioned, Tiff, a lot of other people have, and I've already said about ice packs. So, ice packs have to be the one of the most underrated things in recovery.

Tiffaney: Yeah, definitely.

Rebecca: And also, for pain relief, so there's no limit on how much you should ice, so I would just say if you're not sure whether to ice or not, always say just ice. And it can also be really effective to help with any sore engorged breasts, especially when that milk comes in and those first few days - it can be quite uncomfortable.



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Rebecca: (cont...) We also love the Body Ice products that have both ice packs that are being made for the perineum and for the breasts and they come with a little slip so that you can put the cover on it so you don't have the ice directly touching your skin and they come with great gift packs as well that you can also use as a really good baby shower present if you're looking for some ideas out there.

But last but not least as you might have guessed that bowels, I think bowels are super, super important so it's probably no surprise that I'm going to suggest something to do with bowels. But Movicol, so something like that which is like a softener that you can use for your bowels is really, really important.

So, you may not need necessarily to have that in your hospital bag, but, as you can ask the midwives at the hospital for some softeners, but definitely making sure that you've got it on in hand ready when you go home, because we definitely don't want you straining in that first six weeks after having a baby, whether you've had a vaginal birth or a caesarean section. Straining can definitely be quite painful and overtime can contribute to problems with haemorrhoids and prolapse, so definitely if you feel like you're straining make sure that you take a have a very low threshold for taking a softener, not a laxative, just something like Movicol or Lactulose just to help to get your bowel motion soft and easy to pass.

Tiffaney: Yeah, I think having some tools during labour and post-birth are so important and giving us those tips and a bit more background on what they do is really great. So, before we finish up I wanted to ask you a few final tips on with regards to I guess, returning to exercise post birth as well because you know I think when you've had your baby you really want to know how am I going to get my movement back, my functionality back.

Even if you're not going to bounce back to your previous body, I think just thinking about getting functionality and movement and pain free kind of movement back. What are some of the things we can look at doing to return to exercise? And also, what would be some other general self-care considerations that you would recommend, Bec?

Rebecca: So, some of the most important things are when you returning to exercise, you want to start off slowly. I say to people you won't realise how de-conditioned you are, so for that first six weeks I would recommend nothing more than gentle walking and I say to people, you know, go for a five minute walk up the street and then a five minute walk back I'd rather you go all that was pretty easy, I can do a bit more tomorrow, rather than deciding to go for a walk around the river or a lake or something and getting halfway and getting stuck. So, going really slowly with your walking, especially in those first six weeks. From six weeks to 12 weeks you can start some low impact exercise. So, some people think they get their six-week check with their GP or their Obs and think they're right to go running again. We definitely wouldn't recommend that higher impact exercise until three to six months.

So, then starting some lower impact options like increase the speed of your walking, up and down hills, exercise bike, you might start Clinical Pilates class, something like that. Some light weights sitting down and not considering high impact exercise as I said until three to six months. Keeping in mind that if you are breastfeeding, everything is not as well supported until you stop breastfeeding. Not a reason to stop breastfeeding, but just to understand that everything you know you need to give it a little bit more time to recover so don't be pushing yourself and going a bit slower when you're returning to that high impact exercise.

But yeah, definitely gradually build up your exercise, your cardio exercise but also your general body strength as well, I think that's really important and lower abdominal strength I think that's something that women really struggle with post-natal and it's important to build up that strength. So, the other thing obviously is your pelvic floor exercises. So, you definitely need to be doing your pelvic floor exercises and building up that strength over that time and we know that we want to contribute to at least three months of pelvic floor strengthening before we feel like we've done enough or got to the point where we don't have any symptoms.

So, also recommending healthy bladder and bowel habits as we sort of have already spoken about. So, avoiding constipation and straining because you don't want to further weaken the pelvic floor muscles. Drinking enough water 1 1/2 to two litres if you're breastfeeding you will feel thirsty, also be careful not to over hydrate, but just try and keep to that 1.5-2 litres.



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Rebecca: (cont...) Eat plenty of high fibre foods and consider that All Bran. Regular exercise is really important, don't ignore the urges of your bladder and bowel and go when you do have those urges.

Avoiding excessive caffeine and alcohol consumption to look after your bladder. But also, to look after your back remember to make sure you bend your knees, keep your back straight, and tighten your pelvic floor when you are lifting. Hold objects close to your body when carrying them, avoid sudden and repetitive bending and twisting, and do not lift anything heavier than your baby for six weeks.

Now, I think that's you know very much enforced if you had a caesarean section but not so much if you had a vaginal birth and as far as we're considered, it's exactly the same. And just making sure when you're feeding, you are setting yourself in a nice supportive position so that you're not stuck there for 30 minutes or 60 minutes and ending up with a sore back or neck.

Tiffany: Yeah, that's great to wrap up this episode today, I think Bec. And having a bit of an overall view of the certain things you need to be, I guess, thinking about you know whether you going to exercise during pregnancy or what to have during your birth and then obviously exercising post birth. So, thanks so much for your time today, Bec, I think everyone listening will be really keen to start making plans to get some personalised advice from a pelvic floor specialist after listening today to this episode. So, thanks so much again.

Rebecca: My pleasure, thanks for having me, Tiff.

Tiffany: If you're looking for more support please head over to www.mppp.com.au. Bec and her team can help you out with some amazing resources. You can also find them on Instagram as she mentioned before at [@Melbourne_pelvicfloor_physio](https://www.instagram.com/Melbourne_pelvicfloor_physio), and remember, you can find everything we've covered today in the episode description, so have a great day everyone!