

THE BODY GROUP

P H Y S I O P L U S

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Stretching For Pre and Post-Pregnancy

Before we look at how to stretch you, we need to know how and why you, as a pregnant woman, differ from 'Joe Public', this then gives us a much clearer idea of specific areas for concern.

Lets look at the changes to your pregnant body:

When you become pregnant your body gradually undergoes some necessary changes which allow you to remain as mobile as possible throughout your pregnancy. The main and most obvious change is the growth of the baby and therefore, the increased size and weight of your abdominal area. This change means your lower back becomes more stressed and can result in some lower back pain.

One problem encountered is the rotating of the pelvis (it starts to tip forwards with increased size and weight). If the spine were to maintain its natural curves you would inevitable fall flat on your face after a few months of pregnancy, due to the extra baby weight. The body adapts by drawing the upper body back to centre the weight over the feet. This however, unfortunately increases the loading on the lower back.

This one simple adaptation of the spine has a habit of bringing an array of changes which include rounding of the shoulders, a more forward protracted head and locking of the knees. Once again, as the baby grows and your weight inevitably increases, your body will try to become more stable and you may find that you start to stand with your feet further apart.

Lastly, a few changes that go unnoticed by those who are not pregnant are the chemical changes within the body. During the latter stages of pregnancy the body starts to retain more water, and also increases the secretion of a chemical called Relaxin. This combination starts to change the responses of different tissues where you can start to feel as if your joints are 'loose'. These changes are a key adaptation to aiding the birth process, but they do have a considerable effect on how you should exercise and stretch.

Parental Adaptations:

Now the birth is over and done with, you have an even longer time period to be molded into a jaded posture by you newly born (how exciting!). What happens now occurs to both females and males (providing they do some hard grafting for a change!). Firstly, you'll be carrying your child around, either the child only or in a baby carrier or sling. Slings are often better as they can distribute the weight evenly over both shoulders, although as with a rucksack or pregnant tummy this does add weight changing your centre of gravity, resulting in posture changes in an attempt to adapt.

When you carry a baby on one side of your body, you have to move your body like a Latin dancer (may be with a little less grace or rhythm) usually in order to perch the baby on a hip so your arm does not get too tired. This tends to bend your body in circles and creates a big stress on the spine and if you do not alternate sides regularly then you may find your lower back starts to adapt to this position.

Secondly, feeding the child tends to keep you bent forward and over to one side, also looking down to check they're actually feeding and not rebelling. Then "changing" means even more bending over (followed by turning to the side to gag at the revolting smell they made for you). This can create yet more structural changes leading to compression tensions and pain.

Thirdly, as they are still small and if you do not feel like carrying them, they often insist on being pushed around in a buggy, which is good as it takes the weight off your usually heavily laden

shoulders and gives your chest a bit of workout, which will unfortunately help maintain the rounded shoulders.

Just to finish off, I've left the best until last. The 'Pouch Belly' that little bit of tummy that won't go flat like it used to be! Now during pregnancy the abdomen enlarges and stretches (a lot), the linea alba may also split (central line down the abdominals). After birth, your abdominals tend not to recover particularly well (not as well as we would like anyway), and this has a huge effect on the postural stability and alignment of your spine. This lack of abdominal tone and increased joint mobility (due to increased water content and Relaxin) does not bode well for spinal and joint stability, which is essential for good posture. On a positive note, over the next few months, water retention and the high levels of Relaxin decrease, meaning your joints return to a more normal level of stability.

How to look after yourself:

One of the main areas of concern for a therapist is whether your body can stay pain free and relaxed during and after your pregnancy. Stretching is one of the most effective forms of therapy to maintain postural alignment and is a very relaxing modality for the client as it helps lengthen areas of shortness, restriction and stress.

Active isolated stretching (AIS) goes one step further and stretches one muscle while activating it's opposing muscle. This allows a mild form of exercise and toning for the body. All stretches are only held for one to two seconds and repeated around ten times; this means the muscles do not become aggravated which can happen with a much longer hold.

All stretching should be tailored to the individual; a postural assessment can be a critical area especially pre and post-pregnancy where stretching the wrong area can really exacerbate a previous problem. One of areas of knowledge lacking in many is how the effects of water retention and increased levels of Relaxin affect your joints and the extra care required to reduce the likelihood of joint damage occurring. During pregnancy it becomes very easy to over-stretch a female, which always has the potential for longer lasting effects.

In addition, as many become unable to lie on their backs during the latter stages of pregnancy and early stages of antenatal care, many stretches need to be adapted for the client. Not only is it uncomfortable for the client to be on their back, it can be dangerous for the mother and child during this period of pregnancy. When stretching or being stretched it is often most comfortable to seated or lying on your side.

Now we know what to look out for and how to look after you we can actually go through the key muscle groups.

Some very key muscle groups are in the hip and the chest. The Hip Flexor group of muscles love to get short and tight, creating a more arched lower back and a shorter stride length, these often need to be stretched to help alleviate lower back pain. Extending one leg backwards by kneeling and lunging slowly forward can do this; you should feel a stretch down the front of the hip.

Stretching the chest area is also key, as this helps prevent rounded shoulders and a stressed neck. This can be completed easily with help: simply place your hands behind your head and have a therapist lightly draw your elbows backwards and you should then feel a stretch run right across your chest.

Now it's your time to shape up and start looking fabulous again.

For additional information and enquiries, please contact The Body Group.

17/F, 10 Pottinger Street, Central, Hong Kong

Tel: (+852) 2167-7305

Fax: (+852) 2167-7310

E-mail: info@thebodygroup.com

www.thebodygroup.com