



The Bar Method Pregnancy Workout: Fit Mamas 'R Us

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Being pregnant no longer means being inactive for nine months. Expectant mothers can safely exercise throughout their pregnancy to maintain their fitness in time for delivery. The Bar Method, based in San Francisco, has become more popular since the movie *Black Swan* was released in theaters. Now women can enjoy the benefits of the Bar Method Pregnancy workout as they prepare for motherhood. Lee Potter, herself a mother of three, and a Master Teacher of the Bar Method explains how women can take advantage of this popular exercise known for creating a dancer's body.

1. What modifications have been made from the regular Bar Method workout compared to the Pregnancy workout?

There are many. Here is a sampling. To safeguard against any possible abdominal strain, we do not do pushups on the carpet on the knees or on toes as we do in a normal Bar Method class. Instead, pregnant students stand and do pushups against the Bar. We eliminate the plank series, cobra stretches, or back strengthening work while lying on our front sides.

Pregnant students have less flexibility in their torsos, so we cut out any movement that involves arching the back or twisting the waist. For example, we do not teach the Arabesque seat exercise and eliminate torso rotation stretch after round back.

To avoid a decrease in blood flow to the womb we change up the exercises that involve lying in a fully reclined position. For example, during curl work, instead of cueing students to lie on their back, we place square foam riser mats behind their backs for support so their body is no more than a 45 degree angle to the floor. Our last exercise of class (called back dancing) is performed holding onto the bar either in a standing or kneeling position instead of lying down bending our legs so the knees angle to the sky and lifting our seat up and down.

When you are pregnant your center of gravity changes and your balance often is off. We recognize this and make sure that we do not cue students to release the bar with both hands or balance their body weight only on one leg without first having another point of stabilization.

During pregnancy your joints and ligaments loosen to prep you for the big day as a result of a hormone called relaxin. Many women find they are more flexible during pregnancy, but in a sense it's a false flexibility. For this reason we don't allow students to push past their normal flexibility. For example, a pregnant student stays in the hamstring stretch and does not go into a full split.

As you would expect, we modify the abdominal portions of the class (roundback, flatback, and curl). We emphasize breath to help engage those muscles. In roundback, we use a strap placed over the arch of the foot. In flatback, we keep one foot down on the ground at all times. In curl, we don't actually do any curling with the trunk.

2. Can expecting women do the workout up until their due date?

Yes, it is completely possible to do Bar Method up until the day you deliver. I did a master class (a class where founder Burr Leonard teaches the instructors) the day I started contracting with my first son (coincidentally I was at the Downtown Bar Method's Christmas party that evening when my contractions started). I also took a 1/2 class the day my c-section was scheduled with my twins. Everyone has a different pregnancy experience and you have to listen to your body, but in my experience and in the experience of many other Bar Method students, you can successfully take Bar Method classes up until your due date. The key is in the modifications (see above) and listening to your body.

3. How safe is the workout? Does a woman need to speak to a doctor before starting it?

Bar Method is extremely safe, not only for pregnant women, but for everyone, including those recovering from injury. Burr works with physical therapists (and in the case of the pregnancy class OB/GYNs) to design a program that kicks your butt, but that keeps you safe while doing it. Bar Method is a non-impact workout, so there is no hopping, jumping, bouncing, jarring etc.

Students should consult their doctor before starting Bar Method or any other exercise program for that matter. In the twin world, for example, because being pregnant with multiples is considered high risk, many women have restrictions for part or all of their pregnancy (such as you can only exercise 3x a week or be upright 5 hours a day etc) so its important to have a constant dialogue with your doctor. We require a doctor's written permission prior to students taking a prenatal class.

4. Are their particular benefits for a pregnant woman who does the Bar Method?

Yes! There are about a thousand. First and foremost for me is simply the way Bar Method makes you feel. Some women have an easy pregnancy and feel beautiful the whole time, some women not so much. Some women come to class because they are working long hours to compensate for the upcoming maternity leave or aren't sleeping at night or are already exhausted from running after other kids at home, and this is one hour to focus on your self, to feel a burn in your arm muscles and let your thighs sizzle. This sounds silly, but there is a feeling of triumph after you have completed a really hard part of class and a great feeling after you have completed the whole class. Interval training has shown to result in a greater improvement in mood than training at the same pace for an equal amount of time. Bar Method classes are based on interval training and the improvement in my mood before and after class is quite impressive. (And with three kids aged two and under I need that improved mood on daily basis!) So, in sum, a feeling of well-being.

Second, Bar Method helps keep your core muscles in shape which can help you in the delivery of your children and can help the muscles in the front of the core (the abdominal wall) snap back faster than without Bar Method. I can't speak to everyone's delivery experience, but I pushed my son out in 7 pushes which apparently is super fast for a first time mom with an epidural. I attribute this fully to the strength I had as a result of taking Bar Method for five years prior to having my son in 2008. Even as you grow bigger and bigger and the abdominal wall stretches out, we teach you how to keep those muscles as engaged as possible using breath. (They still may take a vacation during the final portion of your pregnancy, but after returning post-partum they wake up more easily because they were being engaged). Having strong core muscles will also help alleviate back pain that often comes with pregnancy (as your tummy gets bigger and bigger to compensate for the extra weight you naturally start to arch your back and stick your seat out which puts more pressure on your lower back).

Third, Bar Method simply keeps you as fit as possible during pregnancy. I gained close to 40 pounds with my twins and still felt confident with the shape of my arms. I was still very flexible (though stopped doing more advanced stretches like splits etc.) It can help counteract excess weight gain. It helps tone up your upper body (which you need because you carry heavy things like your baby, car seats, and diaper bags around all day long).

Finally, it will help snap you back into shape. I see clients all the time that are pregnant, then I won't see them for say two months, and when they come back into the studio, they don't look like they just had a baby. We have loads and loads of fit mamas.

5. How did the pregnancy exercises get developed?

Burr and a former teacher, LeeLee Treadwell, who was pregnant at the time, modified the regular Bar Method class to tailor it specifically to pregnant women, keeping in mind the guidelines and safety restrictions from OB/GYNs.

6. When you were teaching the class what differences did you notice as a teacher?

I got a lot more winded when teaching the class and I would apologize for always being so out of breath. And I was a lot slower to move about the room while all the extra weight.

7. What are the common benefits that your students reported from doing the Bar Method while pregnant?

Improved mood, increased energy and stamina, better sleep, maintenance of fitness level.

8. Were their other exercises you did in combination with the Bar Method when pregnant?

I tried to keep up with my then one year old toddler so I would go for walks or sometimes hop on the elliptical machine. I did a few Pilates classes but because Bar Method incorporates some Pilates principles and we do so much core work, I didn't feel like Pilates added any to my prenatal workout routine that Bar Method did not.

9. Can women carrying twins do this exercise?

Yes. I am 6 feet tall and had two babies inside me that were way big for twins (they delivered at 5 lbs 12 oz and 6 lbs 14oz) and I was huge! When my father saw a clip of the pregnancy workout DVD he said "Wow! You are so much bigger than the other girls!" When we filmed I was only 29 weeks in and I delivered my twins at 38 weeks and 2 days so I got much bigger after that. You simply do the modifications and listen to your body.

10. What drew you to the Bar Method?

So many things, but my top three:

- the amazing results. I lost 20 pounds, 14% of my body fat, and a jeans size when I started coming 7 years ago. Your fitness level increases in a short amount of time. I got much stronger and much more flexible.
- the amazing community of people we have, from the owners Burr and Carl, to the instructors and desk staff and the students.
- the fact that I can do this type of exercise forever (unlike someone like my mother who ran for decades that has had to hang up her running shoes do to knee problems, I can do this workout for life).

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