

ENDURANCE SPORTS: THROUGH PREGNANCY & EARLY MOTHERHOOD

FOR TRIATHLETES, CYCLISTS AND
ULTRA DISTANCE ATHLETES: HOW TO
CONTINUE RACING AND TRAINING
THROUGHOUT PREGNANCY AND
POSTPARTUM

katie makris
pursuit endurance

pursuit

Endurance athletes are those who train for and compete in triathlons, open water swimming or long distance swimming events, cyclists, and long distance runners. Women who participate in these sports are generally self-motivated, determined, and great engineers of time.

This is something that prepares us ultimately for motherhood, as much as motherhood can prepare some to start their life as endurance athlete after having children. The two seem to go hand in hand for many, despite the battle we all fight with time.

But what do we do as endurance athletes when we become pregnant?

**How do we “listen to our body” when we’re constantly told to
push past pain, discomfort, and warning signals,
to cross finish lines at costs,
set new PRs,
and go for the podium?**

How do some women continue on seemingly unfazed by pregnancy and some have to come to a near halt and limit their activity to only swimming and yoga? And, what’s the right cadence, load, and intensity of workouts when we get cleared after birth? This guide is intended to help you navigate the gray area of workout advice during the duration of your pregnancy, the fourth trimester, and as you enter the next phase of postpartum motherhood.





First Trimester

Intentions

This is the time to start to evaluate the end goal. If you have races on the calendar, determine how far along you'll be by then. Decide if it's healthier for you to keep a goal there, even if the racing will be done more for fun. If it's better for you to cancel registrations, do it. Start to take your gut and your emotions seriously; don't dismiss these feelings. Your goal is a healthy pregnancy where you're doing as much as you can for as long as you can, staying strong, and doing workouts that are enjoyable, and beneficial long term.

On goals:

Just because you're a runner, or cyclist, or swimmer doesn't mean you have to be "that pregnant runner" or cyclist, or swimmer. It's ok if the activity stops feeling good to you – take this as a time to truly cross train and find something that is giving you physical and mental energy.

How are you feeling?

- Remember that fatigue is fatigue, no matter where it comes from. The first trimester can leave you feeling exhausted from the moment you wake up; don't dismiss this as "pregnancy fatigue" and force a workout anyway. Your body's systems are incredibly busy multiplying cells and building the bodily systems of another human being – that takes real work!
- If you're nauseated, stay hydrated. Change your workout time to a time that works better for your body. Get used to eating something small before morning workouts if you usually train on an empty tank.

- Your heart rate is going to be unreliable – blood volume increases by about 50% during pregnancy, and your body’s circulatory system doesn’t even out to accommodate it until about 16-20 weeks. From here on out, go off the “talk test.” Work at or below a fast-conversational pace.



- Your power is going to drop, and your pace is going to slow. Remember that this is temporary. You may not be able to/want to keep up with your previous pace buddies...so, take this as a time to run or ride with new ones!
- You may feel winded sooner – respond to this the same way you would in any other workout – slow it up or drop the intensity! Don’t dismiss this pregnancy symptom and push past it. Your body needs that oxygen now more than ever.
- Your joints are relaxing! Your body is producing a hormone called relaxin that’s making your joints looser and more susceptible to injury. Take extra caution on dynamic movements, and when stretching to avoid injury.
- Ditch your GPS watch and activity tracking devices if they don't serve you. If it keeps you interested and focused, stay with it!





Second Trimester

Intentions

if you have races on the calendar and want to keep doing them, great! Remember that racing in pregnancy becomes a longer, fun workout with friends with a start and finish line.

It's not a time to shoot for PRs, pass people aggressively, dive into the washing machine of an open water swim, or make risky movements on the bike. Your belly is noticeable at this point and keep in mind that risks of your activities become more pronounced now. Ask yourself if the risks (falling on a bike or run, crashing, getting kicked in the water) are something you're willing to take on. Be safe, be smart, stay hydrated, and stay on top of your nutrition. If you're not racing, keep your intention at the forefront of every workout. It's better to hold off and be able to work your way back in after baby than to take longer to return to what you love postpartum. You may not be moving forward in fitness, but your body is changing, and you can push yourself very far back without careful navigation.

How are you feeling?

- Your blood levels and oxygen are evening out, and your belly isn't big enough yet to push on your lungs. Enjoy it while it lasts!
- Nausea may be gone, but your digestive system may be having other issues.
- Pain points – you may be experiencing Sciatic pain, round ligament pain, hip and knee pain, or pubic bone pain. These aren't necessarily a hard stop, but there are modifications or cross training options that will work for you – check with your coach or PT!

- If you haven't done so, start seeing a women's specific or pelvic floor PT. They can help assess weaknesses or hypotonic pelvic floor muscles, provide exercises to complement your training, and help you prepare for birth – no matter what your birth plan is.

This is also an important time to keep the focus on strength training – as little as 15 minutes 3x/ week can make a difference.

- Your belly is probably visibly protruding by this point, and that brings it own set of challenges. Start to pay attention to what causes a lot of pressure on the midline or transfers any tension to your back. You may need to start limiting your time or reps on planking, crunches, pull ups, and other things that require a full recruitment of your core muscles to perform. Doming or coning of the abdomen can be a sign that the pressure is getting too intense.
- Each activity (swim, bike, run) may have weeks where they feel better or worse. The second trimester is a period of substantial physical growth for you and the baby. If something starts to feel off, achy, or feel like you have to force the activity, take a break from it for a while. You can always revisit it, so it's important to remember that taking a break from something isn't necessarily saying goodbye to that sport until after delivery.
- While you may feel less fatigued than the first trimester, rest will still serve you more than forcing activity when you're leaning towards rest.





Third Trimester

Intentions

The finish line, mental health, maintaining routine. You may start to be staring down that “finish line” of birth and trying to stay as active as possible until your body gives you the red light. If you’re still racing or considering it, take the same considerations you would in the second trimester, knowing that your now larger belly can really up your chances of a fall on the bike, or a run-in in the water. Keep asking yourself the why – every day you work out, you should be doing it for your mental health, your physical health, your maintenance of your “usual” schedule or routine, and most of all, for FUN. It’s time to ditch what’s not serving you, stop mourning anything you can’t do, and focus on what you still can!

How are you feeling?

- As your belly expands, you may start to notice you feel like you’re running low on oxygen again...back to those first trimester feelings, but bigger!
- You may not be able to eat as much as you want to at once, but need to eat more frequent, smaller meals. Indigestion may also become an issue and nausea in some cases may return.
- You may be having pain or discomfort in your back, ribcage, pelvic floor, sciatic nerve, or pubic bone. There are modifications to most exercises that can allow you to continue moving in a purposeful way without aggravating, those symptoms, and potentially relieving them.

- Keep at whatever strength training you can. No, this isn't to "train your body for birth" – your body is already strong enough for that! Staying mobile and maintaining some baseline strength will help your mobility, your blood flow, and help you continue to avoid injury as you're carrying more weight. It will also help with recovery after birth.

If you're still running or doing any dynamic movements, ease off if you feel pain or have any leaking. If you're using a belly band of any sort, be sure it's for support; these are not meant to allow you to run through pain.

- There may come a point in this time where you do need to part ways with one or more forms of exercise – THAT'S OKAY. It's not worth risking your long-term health or prolonging your recovery to force yourself to run or bike for a few more weeks.
- Swimming should be available to you until the end, and the pressure of the water is like a giant compression sleeve for your body! Since there is little impact, it carries the lowest risk.
- Cycling may need to move to indoor only closer to the end. These classes are still totally safe, just take care to stay hydrated and make the physical adjustments to your bike fit to accommodate your belly. Don't be too proud to raise those handlebars!





Fourth Trimester

Intentions

This is a time for recovery, orienting yourself to the incredibly demanding chapter of motherhood, and beginning to breathe and move with purpose again as you ease into training eventually.

Do. Not. Rush. Your. Recovery.

It's incredibly tempting to jump back in and you will see women doing it, putting up runs on Strava before they're cleared, posting on social media about how quickly they got back... ignore it all. Focus on yourself, your baby, your relationships, and your rest. Once you get cleared, your first stop is a Pelvic Floor/Women's Health PT. No matter how you delivered, knowing your baseline is key to getting started again. Once you're cleared, ease in the same way you'd ease in after an injury – even slower in most cases.

Once you get cleared by your doctor, you may hear that you should ease in and listen to your body. However, you're listening to a very different body now than you were before! Start with shorter, 30-40 min sessions.

- **Cycling:** if you delivered vaginally, the bike seat may feel completely different, and that's ok. Get as comfortable as you can, take saddle breaks, and hop off the bike completely if you need to. Increases in intensity, resistance and surges may cause pain or leakage – be sure to ease into these bigger efforts. They will come with time. Start your intensity around 60-70% as your max. Keep the handlebars higher until your body is ready to move towards more aggressive positioning.

- **Running:** start short, start slow, and start using that HR monitor again! Go in as if you're coming off a serious injury or surgery with a reverse taper strategy. Test things out with a 1 mile walk run to get started. These don't have to be perfectly timed – run a block, walk a block. If you start to feel any symptoms or start to leak as you increase your running time, walk right away. Lean forward into your gait very slightly, and work on hills (walking at first) and even uphill stroller pushes to start to train your form and control again.



- **Swimming:**
This will likely cause the least amount of symptoms however, swimming can absolutely sneak up on you! You may notice initial back pain in any area, which can be a combination of how you carried, how you delivered, and how your posture has been postpartum. Your core is also vital to proper swimming form between positioning and breathing, so, a weak core will also transfer energy and strain to your back and also, your hips. If your arms are sore, it's from carrying around that little human the whole day. Eventually, your arms will get used to these motions again and fatigue slower.
- Work with a coach who is certified in postpartum fitness, or download an online program to help you ease back into strength training. Many of these exercises can be done at home, with your baby near you, with very little equipment, in as little as 10-20 minutes 3-4 days per week.

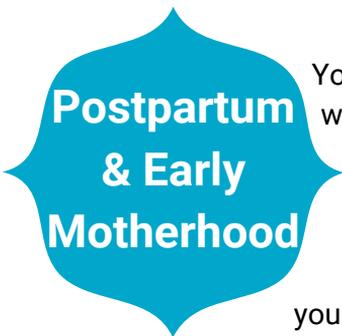


**If you have the urge to sign up for a race, do it!
But buy the race insurance.**

**You will want the option once the time comes if
you haven't had the bandwidth to train, you get
sick, or your baby is in a rough milestone or
becomes sick before your race.**

Check in with yourself emotionally. If you find that training becomes a cover up for other new motherhood stressors, be honest with yourself if you need to seek help. Training can often be a stress relief, but often in early motherhood what you think may be pulling stress away may be piling it on if there are underlying mental health concerns.

Please get the help you need!



Postpartum & Early Motherhood

Intentions

You don't get to wave a magic wand when the 4th trimester ends and go straight into hard, intense, long efforts! While you're probably feeling pretty good, your intention should still focus on keeping with your strength routine, continuing to be excited with your progress and patient with any setbacks, and give yourself time to set some big future goals or race plans! And if you still want to take time off from racing, that's ok, too! Give yourself permission to exist where you want to and know that there are no expectations or competitions for comeback.

- Don't stop that strength training! Continue to stay on top of that and if you bought an online program and you know how to add load or progression, do it as your body allows. If there is a second version or you can find a local class that works for you to modify easily, start to advance past your initial movements into more advanced loads.
- Remember that healing isn't linear! If you have a setback try not to get frustrated. Take the time you need and move back into the work when your body and brain allow.
- Now is the time you can start to push some bigger efforts, ride for longer, and test your limits a little bit! Now more than ever its important to continue to implement progressive load and a training plan that incorporates build, peak and rest/test weeks.
- Get a new bike fit and get fitted for new running shoes with a full gait assessment. These things do cost money and take time, but their benefits are infinite to your progression as an athlete, and your ability to prevent injury as your body has changed substantially.
- Find timing that works for you to exercise and remember that naptimes, pre-wakeup and post bedtime are always options. However if you find you're dealing with an inconsistent sleeper, prepare for that, and don't bank on a certain timeframe to be available. Be open to modifying or splitting the workout up!



If you can, work with a professional coach, or ask me for guidance on how to scale training plans or coaching to complement your recovery and race timelines.

Endurance sports should be fun, and can have a place in your life forever, even given the many challenges that motherhood throws at you. If you need more answers on how to navigate this time, I'm here to help!

Contact me at katie@pursuitendurancedc.com
or visit www.pursuitendurancedc.com
for more information!



Copyright pursuit endurance LLC , March 2020

