

# Baby on Board

By Kristin Auger

Mothers share their experiences with CrossFit training during pregnancy.





I stand just inside the open door with one leg forward, feeling the customary adrenaline and prickly anticipation I always feel before the start of one of my favorite benchmark workouts. The familiar elements are all in place: my comrades milling beside me, bars loaded in rows behind us on the gym floor, music pulsating on high from the stereo.

“3,2,1 ... go!”

I’ve heard the refrain hundreds of times, and I shoot off like a lightning bolt because running is my thing.

“Except for right now,” I think. “Maybe running isn’t my thing right now.”

My chest feels awkwardly heavy on my ribcage, and my belly feels hard and rotund under my tank top. I slow down, think about my breathing. It’s harder to breathe than normal. My legs feel sluggish.

I let a number of determined CrossFit athletes rumble past me, and I fight with my own stubbornness because I remember this internal battle between instinct and ego. Now is not the time to push myself to my limits, as has become customary to me in the last three years. Digging deeper, conjuring determination, getting after it—none of these apply to me right now because I’m 13 weeks pregnant.

## Training for Two

I’ve been doing CrossFit for almost four years, even eking together an ungraceful wall-ball-and-rowing workout two days before I gave birth to my second son in 2012. That pregnancy was wrought with an undercurrent of fear, though: I didn’t really know what I was doing. For my own sanity, I knew I couldn’t give up exercising for 10 months of prime adulthood. I listened to my heart during that pregnancy. I consulted my family physician early on, and when she told me to just stick to walking and perhaps some pregnancy-specialized yoga, I found another doctor. My new doctor told me that as long as I stuck to a routine similar to my pre-pregnancy regimen, I could run and lift and sweat and continue to keep fit.

“Listen hard to your own body,” she urged. “It will know what to do.”

It did know what to do. I made some mistakes along the way (over-zealous postpartum sit-ups led to diastasis recti, aka



Through experimentation while carefully listening to their bodies, pregnant women have found numerous ways to modify movements so they can stay fit during pregnancy.



abdominal separation)—but I gave birth to a healthy baby boy and kept my fitness and my self-identity along the way.

Now pregnant for the third time, I’ve scoured the Web, talked to pregnant and postpartum CrossFitters, seen a lot of false information and hysterical judgment, and come to many of my own conclusions.

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It’s likely every pregnant CrossFitter will need to do the same: There is no encyclopedia for whether it is OK to do Fran while gestating. Definitive answers about what kind of exercise is healthy during pregnancy will not likely be found on the Web, or anywhere else for that matter, though research is in progress (see [CrossFit Training During Pregnancy and Motherhood: A New Scientific Frontier](#)).

Ainslie Kehler is a CrossFit athlete, personal trainer and recent graduate of the University of British Columbia kinesiology master’s program. In her thesis paper on pregnancy and exercise, she explained in part why definitive guidelines for exercise by pregnant women might never be available.

Kehler spent months poring over research and published medical studies searching for the reason for a crippling lack of solid information for women looking to continue their exercise regimens through pregnancy.

She found a study written more than 24 years ago by research team Bung, Huch and Huck, who examined maternal and fetal heart rates (1). They monitored a professional athlete who trained up to six times a week with sprint work, submaximal testing, and strength and endurance training. The result of intense training throughout pregnancy was a healthy, uncomplicated birth and a mother who returned to professional-level training very quickly.

“But despite that study, scientifically valid experimentation through randomized controlled trials may never be feasible or ethical for studying pregnant women,” she noted. It’s just not acceptable practice for anyone to test the athletic





Dave Re / CrossFit Journal

During pregnancy, weight gain can cause an athlete's center of mass to shift, but she can adjust her mechanics to compensate and perform a variety squats.

boundaries of a pregnant woman for fear of adverse affects on the fetus, and thus the prevalence of an err-on-the-side-of-caution culture in the medical and research communities. It's simply easier for mainstream doctors to stick to the gentle-walking and quiet-yoga prescriptions rather than risk a status quo shakeup.

Some physicians will tell you you're endangering your baby if your heartbeat rises above 140 beats per minute while you're pregnant (keeping it below that during even a very slow jog is nearly impossible for many), and knowing grandmothers and random Starbucks strangers will tell any pregnant woman she's a selfish jerk if she continues to attempt pull-ups.

But maybe pregnant women who want to keep exercising are actually inspiring and capable. Perhaps they're strong as hell, and perhaps keeping strength up for the pregnancy will mean better preparation for the rigors of labor and the mental and physical battles of sleep-deprived new motherhood. Perhaps it's likely that doing CrossFit through pregnancy—if monitored by a trusted doctor and conducted with an ear hard against the heart—is actually very good for both pregnant women and their babies.

Here are a few guidelines I've gathered in my own experience and by talking with community members who are listening to their bodies, their babies and their guts.

## Find a Doctor Who Gets It

**K**arla Cadeau is a fitness enthusiast and mama from Toronto, Canada, and she's currently pregnant once again. Cadeau lost her first baby at term, setting off years of worry and caution about subsequent pregnancies and babies.

Though Cadeau's loss was due to a rare condition and not because of exercise or anything she could have done differently, she wanted to do everything with absolute caution to help ease the fears created by past experience.

"This time, when I first went to my family doctor when I was four weeks pregnant and posed the question about continuing my fitness routine, she unequivocally said to stop. After some careful consideration, I didn't end up taking her advice and decided to listen to my body and do what felt

right, much to the dismay and disapproval of pretty much, oh, everyone!

"As someone who has lost a child and endured miscarriage, if I thought for one second that lifting something heavy could hurt my baby, I wouldn't. But there aren't too many people who share that same sentiment," she said.

Cadeau was incredibly relieved to be transferred to the care of an obstetrician who advised her to continue exercising at her current fitness level—just modified for comfort.

"I was floored," Cadeau said. "It finally felt like someone wasn't treating me like I was suddenly broken or super delicate because I'm with child. She listened and expressed that she wished more of her patients included fitness throughout their pregnancy."

You don't necessarily need to find a doctor who advocates CrossFit. You just need to know that every doctor has different opinions, and you need to find a trusted doctor who hears you and understands your exercise and life philosophies. He or she should be willing to consider your unique situation and be able to back up the advice he or she gives.

## Listen to Your Body—Hard

**C**rossFit devotees are typically accustomed to pushing themselves outside their comfort zones, knowing some of the biggest personal rewards come after a bout of serious discomfort.

Sara Stamm Bergland is a competitive CrossFit athlete at CrossFit Taranis in Victoria, Canada, who continued most of her activity for the duration of her pregnancy.

"There were a couple workouts where I had strange pains or dizziness," she said, "so I simply modified or slowed down and things were fine. I was able to jump, go upside down and lie on my back for short periods into the third trimester without any negative repercussions."

Stamm Bergland checked in with her midwives about CrossFit at every visit, and their mantra was, "If it feels fine, then it is." She ran with that wisdom with great success.

Swapping box jumps for step-ups is an easy way to modify a very common movement.



Dave Re / CrossFit Journal



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When doing any activity during pregnancy, it's important to be hypersensitive to everything that's happening in your body. Pay close attention to yourself as you work out and realize you're training for two. When something feels wrong or uncomfortable, stop and adjust. That's sound advice whether you're inside or outside the gym.

## Think About the Postpartum Period

Despite reading that sit-ups during pregnancy may contribute to separated abdominals postpartum, I continued doing planks, crunches and sit-ups throughout my

pregnancy, fearing I would lose my core strength if I didn't.

I ended up with severe diastasis recti, which was slowly repaired with physiotherapist-prescribed core exercises, and I won't be making that mistake twice.

Stamm Bergland has struggled with a weaker core after delivery and noted she's heard there can be detrimental effects from engaging your abdominals too strongly when they are so stretched. She did a lot of sit-ups and planks throughout her pregnancy and now suspects her efforts might actually have contributed to a weaker postpartum core.

“Given how weak my core has been postpartum, I think there might be merit to the theory that sit-ups during pregnancy will hurt rather than help your stomach bounce back post pregnancy,” she said. “I was examined and monitored for diastasis (recti) during my pregnancy and did not get that, but I still feel like my core was devastated by the pregnancy. I think I may experiment with my next pregnancy and cut out sit-ups and T2B (all flexion exercises) as soon as I am through the first trimester.”

Diastasis recti will impact 66 percent of pregnant women in their third trimesters. It doesn't go away on its own and can cause a host of medical problems, including incontinence

and back issues. But the emotional impact can often be the worst for athletic women, as diastasis causes the internal organs to “bulge” through a gap in the abdominal muscles. This causes what is known as the cursed “mommy tummy”: a permanently pregnant-looking belly that can upset previously flat-bellied women.

Physiotherapy can help, and so can avoiding exercises that strain the core (GHD sit-ups, crunches, knees-to-elbows) during the latter stages of pregnancy and in the immediate postpartum period.

## Change Your Competitive Mindset

Pregnant women shouldn't try for PRs or be disappointed when a 200-lb. back squat feels like 1,000 lb. Pregnancy is the time for maintenance, and pregnant women should feel proud they're getting out and sweating. Further PRs can wait until after pregnancy, when many new mamas feel stronger than ever.

You don't need to shrink into the corner and change your

1-mile run into a leisurely stroll, but expect to be about 20-30 percent slower on most of your workouts. If you feel a sense of panic because your nemesis is going to crush your Fight Gone Bad score, make it known you are going to do a predetermined number of reps at each station, and take five deep breaths between each round.

Focus on the movements that actually feel decent as your belly grows. Rowing and wall-ball shots were both great movements for me. I crushed a 5-km row PR days before giving birth to my last son, and the congratulations I got at the box made months of getting slower and more rotund—and getting stomped by my rivals—fully worth it.

## Modifications

For pregnancy, stick to movements that feel right. Do wall-ball shots, shoulder-press movements, rowing and air squats. Burpees start to get mighty uncomfortable in the second trimester, so consider using a wall ball to absorb the impact of the movement with your upper chest to spare your stomach having to kiss the ground. You can also lower gently on your side rather than your stomach and step up out of the burpee if it doesn't feel too awkward.





Dave Re / CrossFit Journal

One of my best coaches advised me to stay away from heavy cleans and snatches as my belly grew because I was just reinforcing a bad habit of keeping the bar too far from my body. He suggested practicing overhead squats instead, as well as moderately heavy deadlifts.

If you're worried about diastasis recti, work on Kegel exercises and tightening the inner core instead of sit-ups. Do push-ups against the wall and avoid plank-position holds that might encourage your innards to escape through your weakened ab muscles.

“ Stay in control of your body and listen to it. ”

Pregnant women should definitely avoid jumping/impact, falling and pushing to the max, and they need to be more concerned with sleep/rest, nutrition, hydration, breathing and fatigue during workouts. Stay in control of your body and listen to it. Some days will be great and others subpar. Make sure to adjust on a daily basis.

Know there is more you can do than you cannot.

## Accept Compliments

Pregnant women who are committed to maintaining their strength, power and personal well-being are admirable human beings, and many find support in their box.

Sandra Boenish did CrossFit throughout her third pregnancy. She credits CrossFit with a swift postpartum recovery and said she bounced back to normal strength and fitness levels very quickly.

“Of course it can be frustrating at times when you cannot do the things you were able to before you were pregnant,” she said. “But being in the environment where you have people around to encourage you is always beneficial, and other Crossfitters tend to be very supportive of exercising in all conditions.

“Fellow Crossfitters always had ideas for exercises to substitute for ones I couldn't do, and they inspired me to keep working.”

During the CrossFit Games Open, just shy of six months pregnant, I was amazed by the cheers and encouragement by my fellow athletes.

On the CrossFit Games website, there's a whole community of pregnant athletes who took on the Open and pushed their own modified, individual boundaries. The article [Competing Until Baby Arrives](#) detailed one pregnant woman's participation in the Open, and several others chimed in with comments. Posts on blogs tell similar stories. I finished 412th in my region, about 200 spots down from where I think I'd normally be, but I can't wait to compare my scores this year to the ones I'll get next year.

## Nine-Month Workout

The bottom line, of course, is common sense. During pregnancy, the female body is arguably at its strongest and most inspiring. It's preparing to do something way beyond a mammoth clean and jerk or a lightning-fast mile, and in the end, the reward is more overwhelmingly joyful than any personal record.

## References

1. Bung P, Spätling L, Huch R, and Huch A. Performance training in pregnancy. Report of respiratory and cardiovascular physiologic changes in a pregnant high-performance athlete in comparison with a sample of normal pregnant patients. *Geburtshilfe Frauenheilkd* 48(7): 500-511, 1988.

**The content of this article is not intended to supersede the advice of a licensed medical professional.**

## About the Author

*Kristin Auger is a writer, tech enthusiast, oversharer and CrossFit athlete. She lives in North Vancouver, Canada, with her hot, geeky husband, two rollicking sons, and a soon-to-be-born baby girl.*



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