



Supporting Athletes Through Pregnancy Guidance

Introduction

This guidance serves to support Special Olympics athletes who are planning a pregnancy, currently pregnant, or new parents. In addition, it aims to help coaches and medical professionals create safe, personalized training plans before, during, and after pregnancy.

Supporting Athletes Considering Parenthood

If an athlete is thinking about becoming pregnant or starting fertility treatment (like IVF), they should talk to their doctor, coach(es), and club as early as possible. This helps everyone give the right support. Doctors may advise the athlete to:

- Take folic acid and vitamin D
- Eat a healthy, balanced diet
- Strengthen pelvic floor muscles
- Abstain (not to drink) alcohol during pregnancy
- Get enough good-quality sleep
- Think about when and how many children they want to have

As a coach, be supportive, respect their privacy, and help adjust their training regime if needed.

Managing Athlete Pregnancy: A coach's four (4) step approach

Step 1: Undertake a Risk Assessment

When an athlete is confirmed to be pregnant, immediately undertake a risk assessment of the sport(s) they participate in. Special Olympics sports can be categorized into **three (3) levels of risk** for pregnancy:

1. **Low Risk Sports:** Safe throughout the pregnancy.
2. **Medium Risk Sports:** Carry a fall risk. Be careful, especially later in the pregnancy.
3. **High Risk Sports:** Not recommended during pregnancy due to risk of injury or complications.

LOW RISK SPORTS		MEDIUM RISK SPORTS	HIGH RISK SPORTS
Badminton	Gymnastic Rhythmic	Alpine Skiing	Judo
Basketball	Handball	Athletics	Powerlifting
Bocce	Kayaking	Cross Country skiing	
Bowling	MATP	Equestrian	
Cheer	Netball	Figure Skating	
Cricket	Open water swimming	Gymnastics-Artistic	
Cycling	Sailing	Rollerskating	
Dance sport	Soft ball	Snowboarding	
Floor Hockey	Swimming	Snowshoeing	
Floorball	Table tennis	Speed skating	
Football	Tennis	Triathlon	
Golf	Volleyball		

Step 2: Plan Together

Work with the athlete to plan their ongoing participation in sport and create a safe, open space for them to talk about how they feel. This helps set a baseline for support.

- Avoid judgment. Listen, support, and adjust as needed.
- Design flexible training plans that can be adjusted day-to-day. Be ready to increase/decrease the intensity or modify exercises depending on how the athlete feels each session.
- Defer to medical professionals as their guidance takes precedence over any training or competition goals.
 - Encourage the athlete to consult their doctor or midwife about training for their specific sport and ask them to share any medical guidance they receive so you can tailor their training plan.
 - Get medical clearance if the athlete has or develops:
 - Asthma, cystic fibrosis, or other respiratory conditions
 - Heart conditions
 - Diabetes (any type)
 - High or low blood pressure
 - Thyroid disorders
 - Eating disorders
 - Concerns about fetal growth or placenta health

Step 3: Encourage Staying Active

- **Maintain Training:** If the athlete is fit and at low risk, they can generally continue training into the third trimester. Always following medical guidance and adjust as needed.
- **Prioritize Body Awareness:** Remind the athlete to stop exercising if they feel:
 - Pain
 - Dizziness
 - Unusual breathlessness
 - Leakage or unusual symptoms
 - Any warning signs from their doctor or midwife
- **Safe Exercises** performed at a comfortable intensity unless otherwise advised by a healthcare provider include:
 - Walking – Low-impact and adaptable to all fitness levels.
 - Stationary Biking – Safe and stable cardio exercise.
 - Dancing – Fun and beneficial if done with care to avoid falls or high-impact moves.
 - Stretching – Helps maintain flexibility and reduce muscle tension.
 - Water Aerobics – Low-impact and joint-friendly; excellent for pregnancy.

Intensity and duration should be adjusted based on how the athlete feels, and in consultation with medical guidance.

- **STOP** exercise and seek immediate medical help if the Athlete Experiences:
 - Vaginal bleeding
 - Abdominal or belly pain
 - Regular painful contractions
 - Fluid leaking or water breaking

- Unusual shortness of breath
- Dizziness or fainting
- Severe headache
- Chest pain
- Loss of balance
- Pain or swelling in the calf

Step 4: Supporting the Return to Sport After Pregnancy

Communicate and be Flexible

- Talk openly with the athletes about how they are doing.
- Be ready to adjust schedules, training load, or competition plans.
- Work together on a safe, gradual return to activity.

Key Areas to Discuss

- **Family and Home Life:** Understand childcare needs and family support.
- **Managing Stress:** Check in on sleep, mental health, body changes, and emotional wellbeing.
- **Balancing Training with Life:** Help the athlete find a routine that fits their new responsibilities at home.

Follow Medical Advice

- Always get medical clearance before returning to training or competition.
- Return plans depend on how the baby was delivered, any birth complications, and the athlete's health and recovery.
- Encourage the athlete to listen to their body and to never push through pain or discomfort.

When to Pause and Consult

- If the athlete feels uncertain, tell them to stop the activity and check with their healthcare provider. Their advice should always be prioritized.

Competition and Fair Treatment

- Ensure all athletes returning after pregnancy are treated fairly and supported to compete safely.
- Know your sport's rules and policies on eligibility and participation so decisions stay consistent and respectful.

Pregnant athletes need more than just training plans; they need holistic support that covers their physical health, mental wellbeing, and maternal needs. By understanding how factors like pelvic health, breastfeeding, and emotional wellness interact with training, coaches can help athletes stay safe, confident, and strong throughout pregnancy and beyond. Click on the relevant link for additional information on [Athletes with medical conditions](#), [Pelvic Floor Health](#), [Mental Health and Pregnancy](#), [Breast feeding and breast changes](#), [Pregnancy and travel](#).

Supporting the Health and Wellbeing of Pregnant Athletes – Considerations for Coaches

Athletes with Medical Conditions

Why It Matters: Some athletes have medical conditions that may be affected by their pregnancy as pregnancy causes major changes in the body, especially to the heart and lungs. Some medicines used before pregnancy may no longer be safe to use during pregnancy.

What can coaches do?

- Confirm with the athlete the medications that their doctor is allowing them to continue to take.
- Work as a Team: Encourage athletes to speak with their healthcare team about the following and to share what they learn from them:
 - Their existing medical conditions
 - How to safely manage these during pregnancy
 - How their training environment might affect them (e.g., heat, altitude, air quality)

Pelvic Floor Health

Why It Matters: Pregnancy and birth can increase the risk of pelvic floor problems like leaking, pain, or heaviness. Physical activity can add pressure to this area, making support during training important.

What Coaches Can Do

- Talk Openly: Create a safe space to discuss pelvic health. Let athletes know it is okay to share symptoms.
- Encourage Exercises: Recommend regular pelvic floor (kegel) exercises—these muscles need training too.
- Adapt Training: Reduce pressure on the pelvic area and adjust workouts during and after pregnancy.
- Use Screening Tools: Suggest pelvic health questionnaires to spot issues early.
- Refer When Needed: If athletes report symptoms, guide them to a pelvic health physiotherapist or specialist.

Mental Health and Pregnancy

Why It Matters: Sport and exercise can boost mental health, especially during and after pregnancy. Staying active helps reduce stress, anxiety, and low mood, and supports recovery after birth.

What Coaches Can Do

- Encourage athletes to speak up if they're feeling low, stressed, or overwhelmed.
- If an athlete has a more serious mental health condition, it is recommended that their doctor and mental health specialist work together to plan their care. The athlete should share this as applicable.

- Coaches can help by being understanding and offering a flexible training approach.

Breastfeeding

Breast health is a key consideration for female athletes during and after pregnancy. The following guidance should be observed:

Support for Breastfeeding Athletes

- The World Health Organization recommends exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months after birth.
- There is no reason to stop exercising while breastfeeding. Physical activity is safe.
- Help athletes plan training and competition around their feeding or pumping schedules.

Managing Breast Changes

- During and after pregnancy, breast size can change a lot and cause discomfort during exercise.
- Make sure athletes get properly fitting sports bras before, during, and after breastfeeding.
- Breastfeeding athletes may need several supportive bras to handle changing sizes and reduce pain.

Energy and Hydration Needs

- Nursing increases an athlete's calorie and nutrition needs.
- Work with athletes to match their meal and snack plans to their training and milk feeding times.
- Remind athletes to drink plenty of water. Hydration is key to milk production and overall health.

Preventing and Managing Breast Injuries

- Sports with more contact (like rugby or horseback riding) can raise the risk of breast trauma.
- Breastfeeding athletes are more likely to experience issues like clogged ducts or inflammation.
- Offer sport-specific tips such as wearing protective gear when needed and teach athletes how to spot early signs of injury.

Pregnancy and travel

Who Needs Extra Caution

- Athletes with anemia, sickle cell disease, heart or lung problems, a history of early labor, or recent vaginal bleeding should not fly without talking to their doctor or midwife first.

General Guidelines for Safe Travel

- Single pregnancy: Up to 37 weeks is usually okay.
- Twin pregnancy: Up to 32 weeks is usually okay.

- Final approval depends on the athlete's health, the airline's rules, and her healthcare provider's advice.

What Coaches Can Do

- **Encourage Medical Clearance:** Remind athletes to check with their doctor or midwife before booking any flights.
- **Help with Travel Prep:** Suggest they keep medications, medical notes, and details of any health conditions in their carry-on bag.
- **Be Flexible:** If flying is not recommended, work together to find alternative travel or competition options.