

I cycled on my due date, then won a medal racing six weeks after my C-section

It's the age-old question — should pregnant women continue to exercise if they have already been living a fit and active life, or stop once they find out the news? writes **Patricia Murphy**

First-time mum Susie Mitchell not only kept cycling right up to her due date of giving birth — she was back pushing the pedals three weeks after her Caesarean section.

As a vet, the 36-year-old athlete brings a fair degree of pragmatism to the whole situation.

“I have done my fair share of births with large and small animals in my time, and even after C-sections I saw many of them bounce back after only two weeks.”

Her view that an active pregnancy is a positive thing is backed up by Dublin GP Rachel Keane.

“I think we need to get rid of the idea that exercise in pregnancy can be harmful. As long as you modify what you are doing and avoid certain sports, there is no need to stop,” says the doctor, herself a mother of three young children.

“I see expectant mums stopping out of fear, which is understandable, but there is actually no need to. We have to try to move away from the idea that pregnancy is an illness.”





(Left) Susie Mitchell (also above at work), a cyclist with Sundrive track team, training with her coach, Hugh Byrne, at the Eamonn Ceannt track in Dublin. DAMIEN EAGERS

ADVICE FOR EXERCISE IN PREGNANCY

Keeping active most days for about 30 minutes will help to:

- + Cope with the extra weight and excessive weight gain
- + Strengthen joints
- + Improve circulation
- + Improve sleep

Obvious activities to avoid:

- + Impact sports like judo and kickboxing
- + Sports which involve the risk of falling, eg horse riding, skiing

Susie accepts though that physically she is in a different state to most other women. As a specialist fish vet, she is no stranger to hard physical work, sometimes in rough sea conditions. Hopping on and off fishing boats, hauling in heavy boxes and hanging off the back of a trawler at sea is all in a day's work.

She also has a background in running. "I competed in several adventure races with my husband Cormac over the years, so I would have been in good shape from those as well."

Just over a year ago she decided to take up a new sport — track cycling — and almost immediately began winning a number of national events, even as she was in the early stages of pregnancy.

"I made sure to get as much expert advice as possible," she explains, "and always listened to my body." She decided to stop racing and competing just after the first trimester but kept up her training.

Her coach Hugh Byrne from Sundrive Track in Dublin said: "I fully supported Susie's decision to continue training. It was the first time for me to be working with a woman in this condition, so we made sure we did everything properly. Every week the parameters would change so that she was always safe and in control at all times."

Susie continued to train for up to 10 hours a week, including a 50k cycle on her due date. "The advice for training on the road bike was no group riding and no wet conditions, just me in the front leading the way at my own pace, with someone behind to protect me. We often drove out to quiet spots and safe routes, taking no chances," she recalls.

"It's okay to continue doing whatever you're doing as long as you are fit to start with, and then pare it right back, just like training for a major event but with a longer taper," she points out.

After an unexpected emergency section in early June, little Tori (inset with Susie) joined the Mitchell McDonnell team.

Although the expert advice is usually to wait at least six weeks after a section, Susie restarted her exercise regime much sooner.

"I felt great after three weeks and my healing was excellent, so I started to join in with the kids' sessions on the track, taking it easy. I loved being back, and because I had done so much core work before and during pregnancy, I was strong," she says.

Susie felt so strong that at six weeks she competed in the National Olympic Omnium, winning a bronze medal in this two-day event.

At nine weeks she won gold in a team sprint event, and at 12 weeks she won a bronze in pursuit and a silver in time trials.

"That type of competition is about riding smart," says Hugh. "Right through her pregnancy we had talked about tactics; we never talked about medals. It is amazing that a 36-year-old can start winning medals at national events, let alone someone who has just had a baby," he adds.

At 14 weeks, Susie continues to train. But a trip to the track nowadays means a whole new checklist of gear as Tori has become a regular spectator.

Susie's advice to any would-be mum is to get fit and stay fit before, during and after pregnancy. "It doesn't matter what you do, just keep it safe and sensible," she says, which is good advice from the mum who has her sights set on the World Masters later this year.

Membership of Cycling Ireland has grown to

15,000

This includes participants in road and track cycling, mountain biking, cyclocross and BMX

*As every pregnancy case is different, always consult your GP before undertaking exercise