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BABY ON BOARD

Pregnancy & Skydiving

Jumping a Round

by Wendi Rogers

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You've probably heard it before, “My new born already has 125 skydives.” This will give a kid something to brag about by the time he can understand what jumping out of an airplane means. By first grade, his friends will tell him they've heard it 100 times and to shut up. But to that kid, his mama is a pretty cool chick.

There are hundreds of skydivers who have faced the big decision: to jump or not to jump while pregnant. USPA does not offer medical advice and leaves the choice to the jumper and her doctor.

Kelly Wakelin, former Virginia, USA skydiver, says her obstetrician told her that skydiving did not present a major risk to the baby during the first trimester. “He told me that if a woman was going to miscarry, outside forces would not be the reason — she would've miscarried anyway,” she says.

Lori Clark, from Arizona USA, says her biggest concern about skydiving while pregnant was hard openings. “I just made sure that my canopy was packed to open slowly,” she explains. Clark says she was also particular about the weather, choosing not to jump in less-than-perfect conditions. With more than 4,500 skydives, she felt confident in her landing ability.

“My main concern was finding a doctor who would work with me, rather than against me,” says Wendy Wilkinson of Texas, USA. “Find a doctor you can be honest with so that if they tell you that you shouldn't jump anymore, it's because you shouldn't and not because they think skydiving in general is stupid, or because women should go to bed when they're pregnant,” she explains. Wilkinson says she toned her jumping down while pregnant. “Canopies were big then (1983), so landing wasn't that much of an issue,” she adds. She also continued to teach the first-jump course through her entire pregnancy. “I quit doing PLF practice with my students at maybe six months. I was making students really nervous.”

On the other hand, Lisa Da Silva, from Maryland USA, quit jumping when she found out she was pregnant. Her husband, also a skydiver, had concerns and at age 32, Da Silva said if she were to lose the baby, she wouldn't want to start over.

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Pregnancy & Skydiving



While most medical doctors advise women not to begin a new activity while pregnant, they say pregnant women can continue many activities they were doing previously. But with little information about skydiving and pregnancy available, many doctors may not know how to react when presented with the question, "Can I skydive while I'm pregnant?" Explaining why you jump out of planes can be difficult enough but add on why you would continue to do so while pregnant and your doctor may give you that deer-in-the-headlights stare that begs the question, "Are you insane?"

Be prepared to explain the sport in terms he'll understand: an unpressurised ride to 12,000 to 14,000 feet with a short time spent at this altitude, a 120-mph freefall, little (hopefully) opening shock and a landing equivalent to stepping off a chair (if you're experienced and confident in landings).

Allan Handysides, an obstetrician-gynecologist from Washington, D.C., says the baby is well-protected in the uterus and pelvis. "Assuming all goes according to plan, there should not be much problem," he says. Of course, things don't always go as planned, so Handysides says to exercise caution.

Some doctors may feel concerned about the fetus getting enough oxygen at higher altitudes. Obstetrician-gynecologist and skydiver, Megan Shutts-Karjola, from Idaho USA, says there is very limited information on how oxygen levels at higher altitudes affect pregnant women. Though living at high altitudes can increase the risk of miscarriage, little is known about short-term high-altitude exposure.

Handysides suggests that a fetus has much greater oxygen needs at altitudes above 10,000 feet but he says if time spent at these altitudes is not prolonged, a healthy mum and baby should do fine. But he cautions, "Persons with cardiac or pulmonary problems might find themselves stressed at such altitude."

A pregnant skydiver has other health issues to consider as well. "As pregnancy progresses, a woman's center of balance, co-ordination and vision can change, potentially making skydiving more difficult," Shutts-Karjola explains. Physiological parameters such as heart rate, respiration rate and aerobic capacity also change. "Any patient with a pre-existing health condition or who is at risk for pre-term labour, placental abruption or other pregnancy complications should not, in my opinion, skydive during pregnancy. At 12 weeks gestation, the uterus is no longer completely protected by the pelvis, and the risks of fetal injury increase. I definitely wouldn't jump beyond 20 weeks gestation, but that is an arbitrary cut off," says Shutts-Karjola.

Wilkinson recommends "It's definitely a personal decision. Make sure the dad agrees—the baby is both of yours."

"The biggest question a pregnant skydiver should ask herself is, 'If I miscarry in the first trimester, will I blame myself?'" Shutts-Karjola says. "Later in pregnancy, the question may be, 'If I have a bad landing or abdominal trauma resulting in an adverse outcome, will I blame myself? Can I live with any adverse consequences?'"

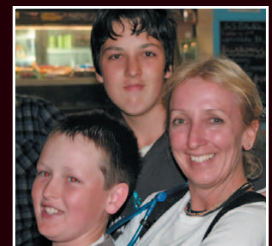
You can't always be sure you will have a soft opening or land gracefully, even if you are confident in your packing and landing abilities. There are factors to consider: How experienced are you in the sport? Are you current? If you have only 50 jumps over two or three years, this should factor into your decision. Consider wing loading as well. You will become bigger, heavier and eventually off-balance. If you're already jumping a high wing loading, can or should you handle an even higher wing loading? You may want to consider jumping a larger parachute while pregnant. You may also need harness and jumpsuit adjustments. If you decide to jump while pregnant, be sure you are physically fit and your pregnancy is not considered risky.

A pregnancy lasts nine months; skydiving has been around for decades. The sport will still be there after your baby is born. Consider all the factors involved and know that whatever the outcome, it's a decision you will live with for the rest of your life.

And the Australian Story...

Compiled by Kim Hardwick, APF Technical Officer

At the Skysisters United Women's Skydiving Event held at Ramblers DZ, Toogoolawah 2005, APF Member Leanne Critchley presented a paper on Pregnancy & Skydiving. The article in total can be found on the APF web site at <http://www.apf.asn.au/articles.aspx>



Leanne's (a Mum herself) credentials include RN, RM, Bachelor of Nursing, Cert NNIC. She also is an ID/AFF, 'E' Licensed skydiver with over 1,200 jumps over the last 5 years.

"Becoming a skydiver is a life changing event and a wonderful life experience. So is having a baby. Although the two are not mutually exclusive, the decision to have a baby creates the need for some complex decision making for the skydiving parents-to-be. This is a huge and under researched topic. There is plenty of information out there for expectant mothers. There is very little specific to the expectant skydiver."

The paper then presents some of the facts, covering issues such as:

Preconception - General health, selecting health care and financial planning.

Issues During Pregnancy - Risk of miscarriage, morning sickness, centre of gravity, blood pressure, emotional changes & fatigue, pelvic floor changes, hypoxia, substance use, overheating, changes in physical shape & dimensions and injury risks.

Postnatal Issues - returning to jumping, breast feeding, childcare.

And continues with some things to think about and some experiences of other women.

Conclusions - "There is little research and no clear guidelines about jumping while pregnant. Advice from members of the general public will simply always be "don't". Inform yourself as well as you can, think about the risks, listen to your body, talk to your partner.

Take care of yourself as well as you can. Be realistic, jumping is out of the question if any complications or

additional risks exist in your pregnancy. This includes: any spotting or bleeding, multiple pregnancy, history of miscarriages, premature labour or stillbirths, high blood pressure, headaches, fainting spells. Get good medical care as early as possible and be guided by your doctors and midwives as to the progress of your pregnancy and any problems. Speak to as many skydivers as you can find who have been through the experience. Everyone will have an opinion, but do what is right for you."

Aussie Skydiving Mums... Their Stories

Faye Cox - First jump 1966 (APF Delegate to ASIANIA / Multiple Australian Style & Acc Rep / Ex IA – AFF & S/L / FAI Judge Artistic/CP/CF & Acc / APF Judge FS/Style and Master of Sport Parachuting)

Being a mum in early 1975 meant harsh DZ conditions, especially in north Queensland. Comfort did not exist as today. Being a hard core, fit jumper for those days I decided to jump as long as possible. Got to nearly seven months, then a tiny hernia had me grounded by CI/husband Jim. Perhaps the heavy fore and aft gear, occasional harder landings and long walks with heavy gear may have helped.



I had Carolyn naturally, but it was a long, difficult labour. Then with baby Carolyn plus little hernia (which did not seem to be a problem without added weight), I was back jumping within the month (nothing was going to interfere with my jumping career). Hot, tropical conditions and harsh DZ were neither enjoyable nor conducive to breast feeding for mum or bub and the first few months were quite difficult (timing the jumps between feeds, both feeling relaxed and comfortable etc.) From my experience, I always recommended potential mum jumpers to stop jumping earlier than later, have your baby and allow yourself six months to enjoy the wonderful new experience of being a mother.

Michelle Laval - First jump 1996 (APF ID/AFF)

When I started jumping ten years ago, I already had one child and no plans for any more. So when I found out I was pregnant 4 years into my skydiving career, my first thought was, "No, I can't jump!" But after speaking with a doctor (one who skydives) I was assured that I could safely jump as long as I felt comfortable to. I was also told that as the pregnancy progresses it would be me (not the baby) who would be most at risk of injury as your ligaments stretch while pregnant and the chances of twisting an ankle or such would increase.



Anyway, morning sickness aside, I proudly kept jumping until 4.5 months (that's half way!). By this time I began to feel some tingling in my legs under canopy and just felt that it was time to stop. (My jumpsuit was also beginning to get a little tight!) I was back jumping a month after childbirth.

I now have a 6 month old baby as well. This time round I only jumped for the first 2-3 months. I stopped for no other reason than the morning sickness became a little overbearing and I just felt too weak to feel like jumping. However, I was once again back jumping a month after giving birth.

My 6 month old has about 20 jumps, my 6 year old has about 30 jumps and my 13 year old is still patiently waiting to do his first jump next year!

Janine Hayes - First jump 1981 (CI AFF/SL/ Tandem Supervisor / LDO/ Multiple Australian Classics Rep / Pilot)

Pregnancy and skydiving - it's a personal choice and my only advice would be to consider your personal, physical and psychological circumstances and then make an informed decision for yourself. I continued to skydive up until four months with both my children who were seven years apart. I consulted with my doctor who was concerned about hard landings while I was more concerned about opening shock. (I was jumping a 252) In both pregnancies I felt comfortable stopping at four months and finished with a demo jump each time - one for International Women's Day and one with a flag into the Grand Prix. While it's an obvious question to consider how long one will skydive for during pregnancy, I personally think the harder question can be: when are you psychologically ready to start skydiving after the baby is born?

Julie Nichol - First Jump 1979 (400-way world record holder / previous 16-way World Champ & World Record holder & Oz 8-way team member)

I stopped jumping at around four months in both my pregnancies, which was a personal choice based on how I felt about the issues surrounding my pregnancies. I had already started a family late (at 39) and did not want to jeopardise my chances of having a healthy baby, even though there was little data around to suggest that this would be the case. I had known (and seen) two previous women (one Aussie and one Canadian) to skydive well into their six months of pregnancy and, apart from needing a bigger jumpsuit; they seemed to handle the experience (even though to me it seemed uncomfortable). I also had friends who were experienced water skiers and horse riders who continued to take part in their sport through to six months.



Although I felt OK overall at the 4-month stage, and I was an experienced skydiver, there was an underlying nervousness about the "what ifs", plus I was aware of the hormone that would start kicking in to relax your joints, so for me it was an easy decision to stop skydiving for awhile.

I did return after both pregnancies – well after the 6-week birth date. You will know when and if you wish to return to skydiving – and if you do, the sport will always be there

Holly Atteridge - First jump 1999 ('E' Lic)

For me, the decision not to jump was an easy one. With just over 500 jumps when I fell pregnant, I knew that I had a long way to go in 'mastering' this whole skydiving thing but even if I had 10,000 jumps I have to assume my decision would be the same. Basically it came down to control and the fact that no matter how good someone is, there is always an element of unknown on every single jump. You rely on everyone else in the sky to fly safely under canopy. The wind can change quickly and become very messy. Not to mention that everyone can have a not-so-perfect landing regardless of jump numbers and currency. I know that if something had happened to the baby because of a less than perfect jump I would not have been able to cope. I respect that it's every individual's decision to make and I respect those who choose to continue jumping during their pregnancy.

Olivia Huni - First jump 1997 (APF D Lic)

I had about 200 jumps when I first got pregnant. After consulting my obstetrician, who was supporting but not encouraging..., and discussing with my husband (also a skydiver),



I decided I would continue to jump every weekend like usual. I was extremely fortunate not to suffer from morning sicknesses. I stopped jumping at the beginning of my 7th month as my rel-way suit would refuse to zip up! Having said that, I have always been on the extreme cautious side, jumping with a very low wing loading (under 1) and flying a canopy known for its gentle openings (Safire 2 144). Also, I refused to jump with large groups and stuck to well known faces and blue skies.

During my second pregnancy, two years later, I decided to continue with the same routine, although I only jumped until the beginning of my sixth month. I was bigger all over and was physically tired looking after a toddler. I noticed I was starting to get more unstable and wouldn't so much fly as plummet while on my belly, usually going low on the formation! That's when I decided I should avoid belly flying while pregnant and stick to sit fly! My husband and I attended the Swedish freefly boogie when I was five months pregnant. It was fantastic, although I couldn't participate in any of the post jumping party scene.

Strangely enough, the accidents I suffered in both pregnancies were not a result of skydiving. I fell off a scooter while being chased by a dog in my first pregnancy and I fell off a horse during the second one. In both cases, my baby stayed safe, I just tore off a bit of skin.

I am not planning on having a third child but if ever the time comes, I would surely endeavour to jump 50 times while pregnant. Every child deserves the same start in life!

Helen Stibbs - First jump 1984 ('D' Licence)

I have read the article (by Wendi Rogers) and have to say that I don't agree with everything that was said in it at the beginning by any means! I do however agree with the sentiments at the end of the article. Basically I don't believe it's worth the risk. These days people seem to want to have their cake and eat it but at some point there is a choice that has to be made. If something bad happens you may well blame yourself for years or even the rest of your life. It is a general thing though, people should make the effort to take care of themselves generally while pregnant and this includes not taking unnecessary risks (eg. smoking, alcohol, skydiving etc).

People without children sometimes have a hard time grasping this concept - it doesn't mean removing all fun things from your life forever! I was very sad watching the Skyvan take off without me at an Easter boogie at Corowa but I got over it!

Initially what made me think twice about not jumping while pregnant was when I was advised of research about opening shock doing terrible things to the pelvic floor muscles and possible incontinence later in life. I thought "who needs that!?" Later I heard that any sort of jolt can lead to the placenta separating from the uterus (eg. opening shock).

It really isn't worth the risk in my opinion.

Chris Sparrow - First jump 2001 (IB/AFF & Tandem Supervisor)

Why I stopped jumping at about 5 months pregnant was mostly due to my pregnant brain. We've said that we'd be able to tell our child that when Mum was pregnant, Mum and Dad tried to kill each other! I took out my partner Pete in freefall in a big way, they called me "The Chrisile". It was about my second or third jump with boosters and I plowed into him and he did a backflip. Lucky he had a helmet on. Another time, Pete watched me have a mal that he packed. It was a hard pull. He was in freefall watching me and he reckons he thought to himself - oops, there goes my wife and my unborn child! I gave myself a three strikes rule: as soon as I had done three stupid things I had to stop, because I was doing lots of stupid things in day-to-day life!



I started jumping again two or three weeks after Brett was born - I had to, I was the only other AFF instructor available. At that time I had about 600 jumps.

Elaine Cox - First jump 1989 (ID/AFF & BMI)

I was an older first time Mum – an issue in itself – being 39 when Greg & I planned Emma. There really wasn't any question of whether or not to jump more a decision of when to stop. Running our own DZ, I had an economic need to continue working, I was healthy, fit and enjoyed a blossoming pregnancy. I also had a progressive thorough obstetrician who I believed in. He advised that given my health, level of experience, currency, and medical monitoring (monthly consults and ultrasounds), there was no reason to stop until I felt uncomfortable which he anticipated to be between 5-6 months.



We operate a small C-182 DZ so prolonged oxygen deprivation wasn't an issue. As an AFF Instructor and cameraflyer, I was selective about the AFF students and Instructors that I worked with, and the weather conditions that I jumped in as part of a risk management strategy. Intuitively I rather felt Em enjoyed the sensation of freefall and felt mini "yahoos" as she embraced the washing machine effect! At 6 months my centre of gravity had shifted, I began to experience peripheral circulatory problems and generally became uncomfortable in the harness so it was time to stop..Em had made 84 jumps.

Three months later, she was born a healthy bundle of joy. For the first 12 months she hardly slept and was constantly active and refused to relax or settle. We were all exhausted.

Interestingly, a cranial osteopath diagnosed her with overactive adrenals which can be attributed in part to genetics, anyone who knows Greg understands he is the original "Duracell Battery Bunny" on permanent endurance & well I am known for my tenacity! However the issue of if or how much adrenalin passed the placenta is one of contention.

For me my hardest decision was going back to work. We had no family support, I was very hormonal & emotional & the issue of softened ligaments & body tissue was relevant to the effects of Skydiving. It was 10 months before I resumed jumping & for at least 2 months I was distracted by the mental picture of Em in my head every time I exited the aircraft, a side effect of that invisible umbilical cord.

Seven years on we are still jumping & Em can't wait to do a Tandem!