

YOGA AND PREGNANCY

Yoga is an ancient practice introduced to the western world many centuries ago. Its popularity has become worldwide and its benefits are evident: the physical aspect of the practice helps us all to 'keep in shape', keeps our bodies healthy and our systems functioning healthy. On a deeper level, yoga helps us develop an inner awareness to our bodies and to our lives, and offers us an insight into the spiritual dimensions of ancient yogic beliefs. As westerners, we tend to mainly focus on the physical and physiological benefits, which is why yoga compliments the pregnant women so much.

From a physical point of view, yoga is a form of low impact exercise; avoiding impact on the joints, toning muscles, improving balance, and circulation, therefore suitable for pregnancy. As the body begins to change, hormones swim through the body, and the foetus grows, it is important to prevent any strain or injury that could easily occur with high impact exercise. Providing mother and baby are healthy, there is no reason why exercise should be eliminated from her lifestyle.

If the mother is an experienced yogini prior to pregnancy, she can continue her regular classes, avoiding any contra-indications by using modifications. If the mother is new to yoga, it is important for her to attend special pregnancy classes with an experienced instructor. After pregnancy, yoga is often an easier and more enjoyable form of low impact form of postpartum exercise to begin with.



BENEFITS OF YOGA

ASANA (Yogic postures)

Pregnancy yoga will gently work on the reproductive organs and pelvis by focusing on hip openers and leg strengtheners, ensuring optimum blood supply and adequate nutrients to the growing foetus. By directly strengthening, stretching and cultivating muscles for birth, you will help ease the difficulties, stresses, tension and physical demands of

childbirth and motherhood. Certain yogic postures are also practiced to alleviate discomforts caused by pregnancy such as sciatic, morning sickness, heartburn and ligament pain.

PRANAYAMA (Breath Control)

As the foetus grows throughout pregnancy, the lungs become compressed and breath becomes short and un-controlled. Awareness and control of breath during pre-natal yoga will help strengthen the lungs and deliver vital life force and fresh, nutritious oxygen to the growing foetus. In addition, many of the powerful techniques will calm the body and re-focus the mind during the physical practice, and more importantly during labour. Breath control will help fight against the urge to tighten up when in pain, and encourage the body and mind to relax instead.

DHYANA (Meditation) AND DEEP RELAXATION

Meditation and relaxation has the ability to calm the mind and body, reducing any emotional stresses, anxieties and fears that may arise throughout the course of pregnancy. Inner awareness also helps to teach the importance of listening to your body, tuning in, and respecting the cues your body gives, (especially as it grows and changes). Bodily awareness will encourage conscious birthing techniques when the baby comes. On a deeper, spiritual level, relaxation and meditation can help strengthen the connection between mother and baby, both inside and outside the womb.

CONTRA-INDICATIONS

- Whether in a yoga class or at home, lying down on the back after the 1st trimester, will put pressure on the inferior vena cava, reducing blood flow and oxygen supply to the uterus. As a result, nausea, dizziness or shortness of breathe can occur. Modifications can be made, for example supporting the back with pillows, reducing unnecessary pressure on the blood vessels.
- Relaxin hormone is present from the beginning of pregnancy and throughout. It works to expand the uterus as the foetus grows, softening the bones and connective tissue in preparation for childbirth. As the hormone flows through the body, it is important not to push too far, or stretch too deeply into any given pose, especially poses requiring abdominal strength. Poses requiring knee bends should be practiced with caution to avoid strain or over stretching of the ligaments and tendons.
- According to studies, any activities, exercise or styles of yoga (such as bikram, ashtanga and dynamic yoga) that cause significant increase in body temperature, should be avoided during pregnancy. Over heating can endanger the growing foetus, and increase dizzy and fainting spells. In addition, fitness or ashtanga devotees need to learn to slow down; As the body changes, a dynamic workout will become too intense during this time.

- Poses that cause compression to the uterus, such as poses lying on the abdomen, forward bends, deep twists, backbends and abdominal strengtheners should all be modified. As the belly grows, especially after the 1st trimester, the pelvis no longer protects the uterus, and modifications or elimination of poses should be made accordingly. An experienced pregnancy yoga teacher will instruct how to perform these modifications so that there is space in the hips, abdomen and ribcage area, which makes breathing easier, and offers maximum safety to baby.
- Advanced, 1 legged balancing poses, headstands and handstands, which can result in accidental falling can endanger both mother and baby. Even if the yogi is an advanced practitioner, she must respect her body as it changes, and begins to grow; learning to slow down in her practice, and focus on other poses that would benefit her most when it comes to childbirth.
- Retention of breath, or rapid breath exercises, (such as kapalabhati) are contraindications for pregnancy and should never be practiced. More awareness should be directed to birthing breath, three part berthing, ujjaii breath and alternate nostril breathing; all calming the systems of the body and encouraging concentration.

PREGNANCY POSES



Before practicing any of these poses, check with you doctor to confirm whether or not it is safe for you to attend classes. Before joining any pre-natal yoga class, it is important to keep the body hydrated before, during and after, by drinking plenty of water. To avoid any dizzy spells, a small snack is advised at least 15-30 minutes before practicing. This will keep the blood sugar level consistent throughout. Be sure to breath deeply and regularly as you stretch, avoiding retention or strain of breathe. Most of all, listen to your body and trust your instincts. Do what it tells you, and what feels best for you at that time, resting if and when you need to.

Extended Child pose (knees wide) this pose allows the body to rest and open the pelvic area. Relaxing the spine, releasing negative tension in the shoulders, and weight is taken off the body as the abdomen hangs down between the knees and thighs

Cat/cow & downward facing dog. The fluid movements synchronised with breath will work the spine, relieve back pain, strengthen the arms and in the final stages of pregnancy, help get the baby into optimal position for childbirth (see also squats)

Standing/strengthening poses Warrior I, II, III. Triangle, Half moon. Warrior poses will teach physical and mental strength, required for child birth.

Balancing poses Tree, modified dancers pose. As the weight of the baby changes, observation of balance encourages awareness, acceptance and patience to the changing body. Balancing poses become harder during pregnancy, and requires concentration, focus and engagement of breathe. A balanced body often effects a balanced mind.

Squats To relax and open the pelvis, strengthen the upper legs, and promote elasticity of vaginal muscles and pelvic floor.

Hip openers Pigeon, Bound angle pose, straddle, knee to ankle. All poses work on loosening and opening the pelvic area, keeping the lower back limber and strengthening the legs to give an easier labour.

Bridge pose- An energising, modified backbend which avoids compression of the vertebrae and overstretching the abdomen. It enables flexibility of the spine, strength in the legs and uterus, stimulates the systems of the body, and encourages deep breathing.

Viparita Karani- supported legs up the wall is a modified variation of an inverted shoulderstand. It relieves pressure off the feet, reduces water retention in the ankles and legs, and relaxed pressure on the heart as oxygenated blood supply returns to the heart



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