

Yoga for Pregnancy & Active Birth

The practice of yoga during pregnancy is a wonderful experience for both mother and baby. Many spiritual traditions speak of interconnectedness and oneness and during pregnancy women, through carrying their child for nine months in the womb, can experience this connection with something beyond and greater than the individual and separate self. At this time everything that we do as women affects our child. Every breath we take consciously and slowly gives the gift of harmony and well being to the unborn child.

The cultivation of awareness of the body in each yoga posture and the awareness of the breath also prepares women for labour and childbirth. Yoga and meditation are most beneficial when practiced throughout the pregnancy. Many women come to yoga for the first time when they are pregnant. Labour and childbirth has been likened to running a marathon – you can't just turn up on the day and go for it! Regular practice throughout the pregnancy, respecting the changes in the body throughout each trimester prepares women both physically and mentally for birth. Pregnancy yoga gives women the opportunity to stay mobile, fit and active throughout pregnancy, empowers them to relate to the sensations occurring in the body in a calm manner, and builds the steadiness of mind to make conscious choices during the labouring and birth process. Women who practice yoga can also be more active in birth, taking comfortable positions such as cat where the weight of the baby is away from the spine.

Many of my students have spoken about the powerful effects of breathing during birth. Focusing on the breath enables women to surrender into the sensations they experience and label 'contractions'. Women can use conscious breathing to relax and let go during labour. Often we label all intense sensations as 'pain', yet through cultivating an awareness of our habitual reactions to sensations during our yoga and meditation practice, when in labour we can recognize that the intense sensations occurring are entirely positive and we can know that we can let go, surrender and trust in the strength of our bodies to give birth.

Surrender is an important practice throughout pregnancy. It is only when we surrender fully to all that is unfolding and learn to listen to our bodies during the process of pregnancy and birth that we experience the empowering transformation that pregnancy and childbirth may bring, as an amazing rite of passage. As an Ashtanga practitioner, during my own pregnancy it soon became clear that with the changes that occur in the body during pregnancy that certain aspects of yoga practice, certain positions must be let go of in order for the pregnancy and birth to progress in the most harmonious manner. Pregnancy is different for all women, and each pregnancy and birth is unique. However it is important to remember, for all women, that pregnancy is not a time to advance your asana practice and is a time to move towards practice which nurtures you and your baby and prepares you to give birth. One's ego and attachment to 'practice', certain postures or a particular series of asanas may get in the way of this letting go and surrender. However if we think about what we mean by 'yoga' we soon remember that 'yoga' is not the physical performance of a particular posture. Rather (one) meaning of the word yoga is 'union' - and in terms of

pregnancy the union we must nurture and cultivate is the union of our being with the being that is growing inside of us.

Besides teaching us the art of surrender, yoga during pregnancy prepares women both mentally and physically for birth, and can also alleviate many of the discomforts of pregnancy, such as insomnia, heartburn, backache and sciatica. Using principles of 'Optimal Foetal Positioning', yoga can also help to bring the unborn baby into the best position for birth (with baby's spine facing mum's belly button). Examples are postures such as cat, down dog and child's pose.

If you are a teacher of yoga, sharing yoga with women throughout their pregnancy is beautiful to watch and it is joyous to see baby wriggling around as mum is standing in tree posture. For pregnant women, yoga is not only beneficial for you, but for your baby. While pregnant with my baby boy, I continued my practice (and teaching) until the day I gave birth, the many years of practice enabled me to labour drug free and deliver my boy into the world healthy and strong. Connecting with our inner strength as women during the process of pregnancy and birth is an amazing experience. If you are considering taking up yoga practice during pregnancy, find a qualified teacher that you connect with and start your journey and preparation for birth and motherhood today.

Below are some helpful tips for women practicing yoga during pregnancy. You should also ask your health care provider for their clearance for you to begin classes.

You know your body best. If any postures feel uncomfortable please let your instructor know and she will help you to find a suitable variation. Visit the toilet as frequently as you wish and drink water if you become thirsty.

Listen to your body. Your body is working hard enough creating your baby, so if you are tired, take a rest. Move in and out of the postures with the flow of the breath. During pregnancy the body releases relaxin, a hormone which softens the bones and ligaments to prepare for birth. Remember not to be too excited about any newfound flexibility! Try to move slowly and not too deeply into poses to avoid over-stretching.

After 12 weeks avoid lying postures. Although your body will most likely let you know this through a sense of dizziness, it is best to avoid lying completely flat as you move into your second trimester. The weight of the enlarging uterus can compress the vena cava which will restrict blood and oxygen flow to the foetus.

After 35 weeks avoid squatting. It is still recommend to continue with a very gentle yoga practice, particularly focusing on breathing. You can squat using a bolster for support. If you baby is still in breech your instructor can advise you on one or two poses which may help turn your baby.

Practice Regularly. Try to attend a class or practice some of the yoga postures you are comfortable with a few times a week. Stay active by walking and swimming.

Return to yoga classes after your birth. Yoga during pregnancy is a wonderful way to cultivate awareness of your body, breath and growing baby. Yoga after birth assists in recharging, strengthening the body and maintaining flexibility. Practicing yoga after your birth is an excellent way to adapt to the physical and emotional demands of mothering with a community of women in a similar situation.

Ask questions. If you have any questions about your classes be sure to ask your teacher. There are many ways in which yoga can assist with different ailments during pregnancy and your teacher can advise you which postures will be best.



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Jean is an Authorised Ashtanga Yoga teacher (AYRI, Mysore, India) and runs The Yoga Space in Perth Australia. As a Senior Member of the Yoga Teachers Association of Australia, she specialises in yoga for pregnancy, birth and beyond and trains pre & post-natal yoga instructors. Jean is completing a PhD exploring the intersection of women's spirituality, non-duality and yoga and is co-editor of *Yoga in the Modern World: Contemporary Perspectives* (Routledge 2008).