



Pregnancy Yoga

Pregnancy and birth is the largest emotional and physical change that a woman's body will undergo. It is a time of great change where women become more aware of the workings of their body, and as the baby grows in the womb, the extra weight results in an altered centre of gravity and postural changes which can lead to a variety of aches and pains including lower back and pelvic pain. Many women find however that with regular practise of gentle Hatha yoga and breathing exercises, the body becomes more balanced thanks to an increase in physical strength, which helps to support the body whilst carrying the baby. Muscle tension is also stretched away, leading to a calmer mind and improved sleep.

The holistic approach of yoga can also help to bring about balance of the ever changing hormonal system as well as reduce common ailments such as morning sickness, heartburn, slower than normal digestion, fluid retention and muscle cramps. When the body functions at a more optimal level it allows time for mums-to-be to harness their physical energy whilst bonding with her baby. Yoga for pregnancy therefore can play an invaluable role during this special, and sometimes challenging, time.





In addition to the physical benefits, the spiritual side of yoga can help with the mental and emotional side of pregnancy. The act of 'letting go' of many things is required during pregnancy and the acceptance of 'what is' will help with being at peace with the aforementioned physical and hormonal changes. Allowing what is not needed in the woman's current lifestyle to drop away to make way for the baby and mothering can also be seen as a yoga practice in itself, and is often the greatest mental challenge during pregnancy, especially when many women have a valued place in their working environment.

With regards to the actual birth of the baby, it has now been recognised that there are many benefits if the expectant mother can move freely during the birthing process. Upright positions may reduce pain and help contractions be more effective as well as increasing the blood supply to the baby, whilst the downward force of gravity when in a squat or wide leg pelvic position makes for an easier and faster delivery time. The challenge for the mother however is gaining and maintaining the strength and stamina to hold such positions and that is where the practice of yoga asana is very beneficial. Appropriate pranayama can also be used to increase mental focus and to reduce discomfort, especially during contractions. Ujjayi breathing, also known as the 'Victorious Breath', is known to be particularly useful during labour whilst Nadi Shodhana or 'Alternate Nostril Breathing' is useful during pregnancy for relaxation and improved sleep patterns.



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When beginning the practice of Hatha yoga in pregnancy it is useful to always remember that every pregnancy is different and so what may suit one person may not suit another. If a woman already has a regular practice of yoga asana, it is wise to tone it down and to not practise closed deep twists or inversions. Lying flat on the back after thirty weeks should be avoided as should lying on your front when this becomes uncomfortable. Awareness of overstretching as a hormone called Relaxin is produced during pregnancy which helps the body to stretch and allows room for the baby is also required as this can leave muscles and joints more prone to injury. Because of this, asanas involving strong backbends should also be avoided as the lower back is much more vulnerable due to instability during pregnancy and is already slightly compressed in the lumbar region because of the increased weight at the front of the body.

The focus should be more on chest and shoulder opening postures as this area often carries extra tension. The hips and lower back also need gentle stretching to encourage healthy mobility as well as strength work to keep the joints stable. Subtle strength work in the pelvic area will help prevent Pelvic Girdle Pain, a fairly common condition for pregnant women, especially in the third trimester, where pain due to instability is felt through the pelvis, especially at the front around the pubic bone.



This can be quite debilitating for the mum-to-be, so starting some sort of strength work for the lower body, especially for the Gluteus Maximus and Minimus as these are major muscles that offer a great deal of support to the pelvis, before pregnancy is very beneficial when planning to become pregnant. This is because more rest should be taken with the first trimester whilst the foetus settles in the womb, and to allow rest when extreme fatigue that is commonly experienced during this time occurs.

Overall, pregnant women should not expect their practice of yoga asana to progress during pregnancy. Instead it is useful to think of this time during pregnancy as a time to rest, relax and open the body physically and mentally. Focus should be placed on postures that are grounding and work with the Apana Vayu, one's downward energy. This will not only help mums-to-be stay mentally grounded but also help the body prepare for birth, as birth is all about physically and mentally letting go and working with nature's forces, in this case gravity, and not against them.

In addition to these benefits, yoga can teach us to be mentally strong and encourages us to go with the flow. It helps us to realise we cannot control everything and prepares us for the unexpected, allowing us to adapt to unforeseen situations. These skills can be applied at any time of life but are especially effective during pregnancy and birth and leaves us with more space to enjoy the journey into motherhood.

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