

Yoga and Pregnancy

Yoga's meaning: union of body and mind suggest its potential as a tool for birth preparation. In order to give herself the chance of a positive birth experience and outcome, a pregnant woman should focus on preparing both her body and her mind. Though there is no way to secure herself a particular birth experience, and an open mind is essential, preparation can increase the chance of a positive, even empowering, birth experience.

Labour can be physically demanding and yoga helps to **improve flexibility and develop strength**. Many of the yoga poses naturally help to **align the spine, work with gravity and open the pelvis**, all of which prove useful during labour. Furthermore, though active birth positions are not prescriptive, an **exploration of different labour positions** and the repetition of such positions over weeks help to ingrain them in the mind, making a woman more inclined to use them comfortably when the time arises.

During pregnancy, there are increasing demands made on the spine and the curves of back are exaggerated in response to an ever-increasing baby and belly. Gentle yoga positions help to **ease tension** and iron out the curves in the spine, bringing comfort to the pregnant woman no matter what trimester she is in. Yoga can also help to reduce tiredness, alleviate nausea and gently work to reduce back problems.

As any woman who has had the experience will attest to, birth is not simply a physical act but a mental and emotional one too. Truly physiological births require a **'switching off' of the intellect** or front part of the mind and a retreat into the instinctive brain. In the modern woman, who is used to intellectualising for much of her life, this can often prove difficult- we have all been beset by an over-active mind that makes sleep impossible. To quell the mind takes practice, but doing so regularly enables you to open up to your instincts and intuition both of which will serve you well during labour.

Yoga helps to **settle the mind**, and as such helps to quell fears and the tendency for self-consciousness, enabling a woman to lose herself to her birth experience. Sandra Sabatini – a well-respected yoga teacher- has said that she loves teaching yoga to pregnant women as their pregnancy makes them so much more receptive to yoga and its philosophy. In the same way, midwives claim that they can tell when a woman has practiced a lot of yoga during her pregnancy; she tends to be calmer, more at ease with her body and aware of its potential for movement and opening, and more able to lose herself to the natural process of birth.

Breathing deeply and an awareness of the breath are integral to birth and to yoga, and regular yoga practice not only helps to deepen and broaden the breath but also helps to focus attention on our breathing and in particular on the exhalation and its capacity to release tension in the mind and the body. The ability and the consequent tendency to breathe through contractions is emphasised time and time again as one of the major benefits of having done yoga in pregnancy. If you derive no other benefit from your yoga practice, focus on the breath will undoubtedly help during labour and increase your capacity to cope.

Finally, a regular yoga session enables a pregnant mother to **relax and enjoy some time focussing on her baby**. The demands of work or older children can often mean that pregnancies fly by with little time to savour the experience or acknowledge the prospect of a new baby and all that it will entail. A designated hour and a half during the week (or more) to indulge yourself is arguably well-deserved when doing nothing less than growing a little person!

General Guidelines for Yoga Practice

Yoga can not be understood as an intellectual exercise. It needs to be experienced from the inside out. It involves time and in particular attention to the nuances of the body and the tendencies of the mind. Regular practice will increase self-awareness, self-acceptance and will gradually open the body and tame the mind.

The point of yoga is not to get into outlandish or impressive positions, but rather to coax the body gently, encouraging it to unfold and yield without force or aggression.

Always make sure you listen to your own body. Recognise that whilst your ability to do particular poses might improve over time, you will find yourself more or less able day to day depending on your mood and general well-being- so assume nothing and always be attentive.

Work slowly and very much within your comfort zone. This is especially important when pregnant, as the body's ligaments soften in preparation for birth and this increases the potential for over-stretching. If you suffer from any pelvic pain or discomfort then moderate a pose or discontinue practicing it.

Things to avoid:

Lying on the back from 34 weeks.

Over-stretching in the pelvis. Wide-legged positions or squatting with SPD or DSP.

Any practice if there has been bleeding. In such an instance, consult your doctor or midwife.

Avoid squatting and forward bends if suffering from haemorrhoids or vulval varicosities.

Avoid squatting with breech presentations after 34 weeks.

Anything that feels as though it is straining or excessive.