

**Yoga for Pregnancy**  
by Donalee Campbell  
July, 2007

Pregnancy is a time of change, and a time for change in a woman's life. It may be the first time in a woman's life when she is no longer the centre of her own attention. Suddenly, the world revolves around someone else, and this change is transformative on spiritual, emotional and physical levels. Whether a woman starts practicing during pregnancy or long before, yoga facilitates these changes with both ease and grace.

Yoga is a roadmap for spiritual development and growth, preparing the individual for a new perspective on life, one that includes more than individuality. With a new, dependent life on the horizon, this is invaluable preparation for what is to come. More than just physical training, yoga is also psychophysiological. The asana, or physical component, prepares the body and mind for meditation. It builds mental strength and tolerance. It soothes, calms, and creates tranquility in the mind. As the fetus is intimately connected to the mother's emotional state, this affects the fetus directly. It is also good preparation for motherhood, in an obvious way.

Physically, a healthy lifestyle becomes imperative in pregnancy. The mother's health will guide the development of the baby within the womb. The effort dedicated to healthy eating and exercise pays back much more in terms of energy to burn. With supervision by an experienced teacher, yoga asana can be modified to accommodate any level or condition and the small associated risks are far outweighed by the enormous benefits. Yoga works the respiratory, circulatory, endocrine and digestive systems, eradicates toxins and balances the nervous system and the brain. It strengthens the musculature, the bones, and the immune system. It is not only preventative, but curative as well, complimenting western medicine and helping to eliminate side effects. In short, it is a holistic system for perfect health and equilibrium. In a pregnant woman, it creates the optimal environment for the growing fetus.

Common medical advice is that continuing any exercise program is not contraindicated as long as it was done before pregnancy. Extra care needs to be taken, therefore, for those who are just beginning yoga during their pregnancy. Women should first seek their own doctor's advice, but also be aware that most doctors do not know the particulars of yoga asana. In general, the woman should be guided by her comfort. As yoga is intended to increase self-awareness, this is part of the training to pay attention to the feelings present, and to heed to any signals of distress. It is particularly important that the teacher stress self-awareness and authority over one's own body. Any pose or activity should be stopped at the first sign of faint, dizziness, nausea, pain or undue fatigue. All poses should be done gently and very carefully. During pregnancy blood pressure can easily increase, and although asana can be therapeutic for this problem, they need to be built up to gradually. Most women welcome the increase in flexibility that comes with pregnancy hormones, but particular attention should be paid to ensure proper alignment in order to protect the joints and ligaments that secure the structural integrity of the body.

In the first trimester of pregnancy, most asana can still be performed. The exception would be abdominal and lumbar asana (as well as sit-ups and leg lifts). As the abdomen enlarges, the woman's centre of gravity changes, and extra caution should be taken to avoid falls. The fetus should never be compressed or pressured, and so no poses should be done lying face down. Many of these could be modified to standing upright with the support of a wall. As the fetus grows in size, its weight can compromise a major artery when the woman is lying on her back, and so these poses should not be done if they cause any discomfort, especially in the last trimester. Even sitting upright becomes very strenuous and should not be done unsupported for long periods of time.

Specific issues, cautions and possible modifications for each group of asana follow:

1. Standing poses improve the breathing, free the body movements, relieve backaches, heaviness in the abdomen, and morning sickness. There are cautions against all standing poses for those prone to miscarriage, and as standing poses do require considerable core strength, it's wise to do all standing poses with the back against a wall or a chair underneath the pelvis for support. This will also help ensure proper alignment in a

rapidly changing body, protect loosening ligaments and help to avoid dangerous falls. Don't jump into the standing poses, use blocks and props to support them when required, and avoid tension and/or compression in the pelvis, abdomen, diaphragm and chest.

2. Forward bends strengthen the spine and back to help support the fetus and relieve pressure on the tailbone. They can open the pelvis, ease the passing of urine, check vaginal discharge, make room for the fetus, facilitate an easy delivery, and even minimize labour pains. They should be done sitting on a block or other support, keeping the spine concave and the chest well lifted rather than caving forward. Particularly important are Baddha Konasana; Supta Baddha Konasana, supported to raise the chest and head; and Upavista Konasana, keeping hands behind for support. I would suggest doing all these with the back supported against a wall as well, to ease and strain on the abdominals and to avoid compromising the sacroiliac joint.
3. Sitting poses remove swelling in the hands, legs, and face, prevent varicose veins, tone the kidneys, and ease breathing, morning sickness, constipation and flatulence. They could also be done supported on a block and against a wall as well. Virasana supported on a block and Supta Virasana; supported as above, are important and helpful for sacroiliac pain.
4. Inversions help bring blood to the brain, freshness to the mind, and calm the nerves. They can relieve severe vomiting, toxemia, blurred vision, bleeding, discharge, swelling, varicose veins and cramps. Avoid inversions if prone to high blood pressure. Safe inversions through the 2<sup>nd</sup> trimester are Adho Mukha Svanasana; Setu-bandha Sarvangasana, supported under the pelvis with legs bent, feet flat on the floor; Uttanasana, with bent legs slightly apart; and Prasarita Padotanasana, keeping the spine extended and the head supported on a block or chair.
5. Abdominal and lumbar poses should be avoided throughout pregnancy. It is more important during this time to facilitate ease and relaxation in the abdominal area. Strength and toning can be done after recovery.
6. Twists help to remove tension in the spinal column, remove toxins, and improve the functioning of the digestive system. Simple twists such as Bharadvajasana or a sitting twist in a chair or in Sukhasana could be done if done very mindfully and gently, as long as they do not compress the abdomen. Maricyasana III, can be modified to twist away from the knee rather than toward it.
7. Backbends are very important in opening the chest and heart region, and can be done safely if adequately supported. Care should be taken to focus the bend in the upper spine, and support the middle. I would suggest a seated backbend supporting the lower back with the hands, as well as gentle shoulder openers. It is important to open the chest as the pregnancy will exaggerate a tendency to slouch, as will breastfeeding and baby carrying.
8. Savasana is extremely important to help the mother relax, rejuvenate and regenerate. It should be done lying on the side, with support not only between the knees but between the feet as well, to keep width in the sacroiliac joint. Pranayama is also very important, but I found it best to sit against a wall for support, and to maintain an easy, complete breath, focusing on opening the intercostals to ease breathing as the diaphragm becomes compressed. Meditation will benefit both mother and child in ways beyond immediate recognition.