

# Yoga for Moms-To-Be

BY LYNN FELDER / ASANA SEQUENCE  
CREATED BY SHIVA REA

**S**ITTING CROSS-LEGGED on sticky mats arranged in a wide circle, seven women inhale deeply, fling their arms wide, and turn their faces up toward the ceiling. Exhaling slowly, they round forward and wrap their arms around their big bellies to embrace their growing babies. The room, sea-foam green and mirrored, is pleasantly dim. Unstructured, relaxing music plays quietly in the background. It is almost like being underwater. Or in the womb.

The women, all in the second and third trimesters of their pregnancies, are here strengthening their bodies and spirits and finding a measure of comfort and community in Amanda Fitzgerald's prenatal yoga class at BodyMind Inc. in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Fitzgerald is a childbirth educator who owns MotherSpirit, a company that provides education and support for natural childbirth and parenting.

Fitzgerald, other prenatal teachers and students, and even some medical professionals say that prenatal yoga can ease the discomforts of pregnancy, such as moodiness, shortness of breath, and swollen ankles; can give women time to bond with their babies; and can help them prepare for the rigors and mysteries of labor.

Angela Gallagher, 35, another prenatal yoga teacher located in Winston-Salem, feels strongly that a sense of community is important during pregnancy. "I end class with a muffin, a cup of tea, time to talk, and sometimes different speakers," she says. She tells her students that if they don't feel up to a class, they should come at the end—just for the fellowship. Prenatal yoga classes can provide a chance to spend time with other pregnant women sharing experiences and concerns, especially helpful if a woman is feeling stressed, unsupported, or fearful.

Class is a place where information is exchanged and questions answered, so it's important that the teacher be trained in prenatal yoga—and it's even better if she's

been through the experience of childbirth. Prenatal yoga is a great way to train for labor and to enhance the experience of pregnancy, explains Gallagher, whose daughter, Ruby, is 3. "Labor is one of the most physical things you'll ever do," she explains. "You would not run a marathon without preparation: Why would you go into labor without preparing for it?" Asanas, the physical poses, can help build strength and stamina and improve circulation. Meditation can improve the abilities to relax and to concentrate. Pranayama, breathing exercises, can help manage the pain of contractions.

Standing postures, like Virabhadrasana II (Warrior II Pose), can increase your leg strength and also generate courage and self-confidence. Kneeling on hands and knees and rounding the back up toward the ceiling can help a woman rehearse tilting her pelvis to facilitate the baby's delivery. "This modified Cat-Cow is a good one to move the baby into the right position for the delivery," says Fitzgerald. Sitting in Baddha Konasana (Bound Angle Pose), with the soles of your feet together and the knees moving away from each other, and doing modified squats can increase blood circulation to the pelvic floor and help a woman get used to the feeling of opening up. "The most open you will ever be is in labor," says Gallagher. "Labor is no time to be shy."

Yoga class is no time to be shy either. It's a time to get to know your body and to build confidence in your ability to give birth. Yoga students and teachers alike stress the fact that women possess the innate skills to give birth in a natural and healthy way, despite Western medicine's inclination toward interventions like epidurals, forceps deliveries, and C-sections. In yoga class a woman can learn to tune in and respond to her body's needs, so that during her labor, when rational

thought may be suspended, she'll be able to identify and ask for what she wants.

The process of birth is not a Hollywood script with harp music, diaphanous robes, and sweetly smiling cherubim. It is work made of muscle, sinew, sweat, blood, and love. By toning the body, mind, and spirit, yoga can help a mother be present for the miracle of birth. "Yoga helps you prepare for the unknown by knowing yourself," says Colette Crawford, mother of four, director of the Seattle Holistic Center, and author of the videotape *Yoga for Pregnancy, Labor & Birth* (see more video titles on page 145 and the review on page 194).

## What to Expect

EXPERTS AGREE ON some general rules for practicing yoga during pregnancy.

**If you have never practiced yoga or have practiced very little before your pregnancy,** you should practice only prenatal yoga while pregnant.

**If you already had a strong yoga practice before your pregnancy,** you may be able to continue a fairly vigorous practice—with modifications—after your first trimester.

**During the first trimester** both beginning and experienced yogis should only do a gentle practice or none at all, as the fetus is still implanting and the risk of miscarriage is highest.

## MALASANA PREPARATION (Garland Pose Preparation)

This deep squat is the consummate prenatal pose and a natural birthing position. It opens the hips, strengthens the legs, and tones the pelvic floor. Sit with your entire back side against a wall. Turn your toes out and open your legs as much as necessary to accommodate your belly. Bring your arms inside your legs, hands in Namaste (prayer position), and press your elbows against the knees to increase hip flexibility and lengthen the inner thighs. Ground through your heels while actively extending your spine in the opposite direction. As gravity helps coax your hips open in this pose, you should feel a sense of buoyancy in the pelvic floor, making this a good position for practicing Kegel exercises. As you cultivate stamina in the pose, develop an inner attitude of equilibrium.

(Colored seats  
weekend)

Shari Barkin, M.D., a pediatrician with Wake Forest University Health Services/Brenner Children's Hospital in Winston-Salem, who practiced yoga during her two pregnancies, cautions against starting "any new kinds of strenuous activities during pregnancy. However do spend at least 10 minutes a day doing Ujjayi breathing (Victorious Breath). Do some hip openers, forward folds, and Cat-Cow poses," she says. "If you are used to doing yoga, then keeping up your regular routine with modifications is important."

In all three trimesters pregnant women can expect to experience hormone surges, mood swings, bouts of insomnia, and frequent urges to urinate, explains Stephanie Keach, director of the Asheville Yoga Center and mother of two boys. Two kinds of pranayama are especially beneficial during pregnancy: Ujjayi, a long, strong, deep breath that helps you to focus on the present moment and maintain calm, and Nadi Shodhana, (Alternate Nostril Breathing), which according to yogic teachings helps to balance the body's energy flows. Avoid any kind of breath retention or hyperventilation that could limit the baby's oxygen supply. "As the circulatory, cardiovascular, endocrine, digestive, and nervous systems get nurtured by correct deep breathing, sleep comes easier and moodiness is less intense," Keach says.

During pregnancy the body produces the hormone relaxin, which softens the

### MALASANA IN A CHAIR

This is the ideal version of Malasana to practice if the tendons and ligaments are soft and loose from prenatal hormones, causing sacroiliac pain. It has many of the benefits of full Malasana—primarily, it stretches the inner thighs—but can be done with a side stretch to open the intercostal muscles of your rib cage, crucial to good breathing. Position yourself as in Malasana Variation I, but with the pelvis supported on a chair seat. Extend from the root of your pelvis to the crown of your head and bring your right elbow to your right thigh, pressing the elbow against the thigh to help you revolve the torso toward the ceiling. Stretch your left arm above your head and reach through your fingertips. Repeat on the opposite side.

### MALASANA VARIATION

This variation strengthens the legs—strength you will definitely call upon during the pushing phase of labor—tones the pelvic floor, opens up the shoulders, and helps pregnant women access the power within their bodies. Step your feet wide, with your knees over your heels and your toes pointing out. Externally rotate the upper thighs, ground firmly through your feet, and feel the rebounding lift through the spine. Since many pregnant women have a tendency toward a swayback curve in the lower back, most need to ground through their tailbone, taking care to position the pelvis so that the baby's weight is not pulling the spine forward. Once your pelvis is balanced and symmetrical, interlace your hands, palms up, and straighten the arms, keeping the inner shoulders relaxed and stretching through the outer shoulders.



connective tissue. The good news is that this allows the pelvic joints to become more flexible while the uterus expands, making space for the baby. The bad news is that it can lead to instability in the sacroiliac joints and can cause lower back pain, so pregnant women need to be careful not to overstretch in their asana practice. "Pregnancy is not a time to strive for more flexibility, although it may occur" adds Keach.

### First Trimester (0 to 13 weeks)

THE FIRST TRIMESTER holds mixed blessings for most women. There can be a lot of joy as well as much discomfort. Most women experience nausea and fatigue. They may not look pregnant, but profound bio-

logical and musculoskeletal changes are occurring in the body. "It is rare to want to do anything physical during this time, so I don't have many first trimester mamas," Keach says. Although most experts advise against starting a yoga practice in the first trimester, they also say if you already have a strong practice, you can continue yoga with modifications. "Do not do inversions, twists, or jumps in your first trimester," Barkin says. "Step back; don't jump back in Sun Salutations. It's important not to jar or threaten implantation of the fetus and placenta." Barkin also advises substituting Ustrasana (Camel Pose) and Setu Bandha Sarvangasana (Bridge Pose) for Urdhva Dhanurasana (Upward-Facing Bow Pose) during your first trimester. Consult with a

### PASCHIMOTTANASANA (Seated Forward Bend)

This pose strengthens the erector spinae, the muscles along the spine which help you maintain good posture while carrying and feeding your baby. It also stretches the backs of the legs and calms the mind. Fold a blanket and place it under your pelvis for firm support. Sit in Dandasana (Staff Pose), spreading your legs to make room for your belly. If you're extremely flexible, you can hold your feet, but most people should place a strap around the balls of the feet. With straight arms, tilt forward at the hips as far as is comfortable, focusing on moving your spine into the body rather than rounding your back to come into a forward bend. Find a comfortable position for the neck and reach through the crown of the head.

