

FAMILY HEALTH

Tips for Practicing Yoga While Pregnant

October 10, 2013, 12:00AM

Staying healthy during pregnancy is important for moms-to-be. Yoga is a wonderful form of exercise to practice during pregnancy, but specific precautions must be taken to ensure a safe yet effective practice.

First, yoga during pregnancy is only recommended for those who have practiced yoga prior to pregnancy. Second, it is important to be mindful that this practice is designed to ensure the safety of the changing physiology and fetus. It should promote pelvic floor and full-body strength, enhance deep breathing and reduce stress. Therefore, this is not the time to push one's practice to the edge, gain ultimate flexibility, practice hot yoga or perform advanced and inverted poses.

During pregnancy, various physical and metabolic changes take place, including:

- Resting heart rate increases 18 to 20% (approximately 15 bpm) above the non-pregnant state.
- Resting oxygen consumption increases approximately 10 to 30% during pregnancy.
- The metabolic rate increases 15 to 20% during pregnancy to support the growing fetus.
- Due to the increased metabolic rate, heat production increases, resulting in increased perspiration, fatigue in hot environments or even heat exhaustion.
- Anatomically, the organs and uterus shift as the fetus grows and posture is altered; therefore, joint stability decreases and balance may become more difficult.
- The body releases higher amounts of a hormone called relaxin, which relaxes the body, joints and ligaments to assist in the birthing process. Therefore, this increased flexibility in the joints may encourage some pregnant yogis to overstretch their muscles.

Each trimester comes with its own challenges and guidelines. Throughout the first trimester, upright exercises are recommended to strengthen the legs, core and full-body. In addition, yogis will want to increase circulation and focus on mildly opening the hips and lower back to avoid future trimester joint stress or sciatica. During the second and third trimesters, yogis should avoid backbends, supine (laying facing up) and major twisting postures. Mild twisting from the shoulders is appropriate when seated or upright, but avoid full-on twists in any posture.

Pregnant yogis should be conscious of the following recommendations:

- Avoid practicing in hot temperatures throughout pregnancy.
- Incorporate a stable device (chair or wall) to aid in balance, especially during the

second and third trimesters, as this is the time when the body experiences major shifting of the organs and uterus.

- Avoid forceful stretching of the muscles and abdominal region.
- Inversions are not recommended, especially during the second and third trimesters.
- Listen to internal cravings for water or additional food, especially if you have developed gestational diabetes.
- If you experience any complications with pregnancy, consult your doctor to see if yoga is an advisable form of exercise.

Deep breathing is one of the best things for pregnant yogis to practice as labor involves an (often) extensive period of deep inhalations and exhalations.

Below are some asanas to incorporate into a daily practice throughout your pregnancy experience to invigorate your spine, body and breath.

Cat/Cow



Start on all fours, with hands under shoulders and knees hip-distance apart. Exhale, round your spine toward the ceiling and inhale as you lower the navel toward the floor. Keep your eye gaze onto the floor; the head may experience minor movement, but the goal is to keep your neck neutral.

Seated Butterfly



Sit with your hips on the ground and lift the spine tall. (Sit on a block or blanket to further support a neutral spine.) Place the soles of your feet together and lower your knees to the side. Keep your hands on the floor, but on the outside of the legs.

Birddog Stability Balance



On all fours, extend your right leg toward the wall behind. Once you are balanced, slowly, extend your left arm forward with thumbs facing the ceiling. Hold for three to five breaths, and switch sides.

Kneeling Side Stretch



Position the knees about two fist-lengths apart. Align the body to where your chest is over your hips, and hips are over your knees. Place your right hand on your hip and inhale your left arm overhead. Slowly tilt the shoulders to the right to feel a gentle stretch on the left side of your body. Hold for three to five breaths. Slowly come back to center and repeat on the opposite side.

Low Lunge



From all fours, lift your chest over the hips and bring your right leg forward to a 90-degree angle. Hold the 90-degree angle at the legs, and lift one or both arms

overhead. Hold for three to five breaths and switch sides.

Tree Pose With Namaste Hands



Place your hands on your hips and turn your right knee away from the body. Keep the toes on the floor and place the heel above the ankle. Use a wall or chair for balance support. To increase the balance challenge, bring one or both hands in front of your heart into prayer position, or place the foot on the calf. Hold for three to five breaths and switch sides.

Warrior Two



Position your feet wider than your shoulders. Turn your right foot to face forward and your left foot toward the side wall. Place your hands on your hips and softly bend your right knee. To progress the pose, raise your arms to shoulder height. Hold for three to five breaths and switch to the other side.

Supported Triangle Pose



Position your feet wider than your shoulders. Turn your right foot to face forward and left foot toward the side wall. Place your right hand on the hip, and lift your left arm overhead. To increase the challenge, slowly lean 2 to 3 inches toward the right leg to feel a mild stretch on the left side of your body. Hold for three to five breaths and switch sides.



By Elizabeth Kovar

Elizabeth Kovar M.A, personal trainer and yoga/fitness instructor, earned Yoga Alliance 318 hours in Ashtanga yoga & Chakra Meditation from the Ayurveda & Yoga Retreat and Hospital in Coonor, India. She studied yoga in five different countries, and learned through some of the best names in the yoga industry. Her Master's Thesis "Creating Yoga Programs for People with Movement Disabilities" was implemented on a 12 week research study for people with Stage 1-2 Parkinson's Disease with the University of Toledo Physical Therapy and Neurology Department. She resides in Seattle, WA

and is the fitness coordinator at the City of Lynnwood Recreation Center. Elizabeth is also a freelance fitness / travel writer, workshop presenter and instructs an online Yoga 1 & 2 course for Walla Walla Community College. Questions or comments can be directed to erkovar@yahoo.com