

# Yoga in the Childbearing Years

Yoga provides a slew of mind and body benefits for mothers-to-be and new moms easing back into a workout regime. » **HEATHER HUDSON**

**T**here's a reason yoga has stretched its way into most mainstream gyms: Not only is it a time-honoured discipline and lifestyle, it's a solid workout.

Women in their childbearing years especially stand to gain more than just good form from this gentle, yet challenging, exercise. Practicing yoga has been shown to increase circulation, help prevent injuries, encourage muscular balance and alleviate stress, all vital to pre- and postnatal health.

In fact, yoga is ideal for women in the midst of starting and tending to a family, according to Andrea Page, prenatal yoga instructor and founder of FitMom, a program that offers a variety of fitness classes designed for pre- and postnatal women.

"Not only does yoga condition the body and force you to slow down, it helps you make the mind/body connection. That's important for any active person, but particularly the woman preparing for, giving and recovering from birth," she says.

## Why is yoga important during pregnancy?

Exercise during pregnancy is proven to increase the flow of oxygen and nutrients to the baby while helping condition the mother's body for birth.

As assistant director at the Canadian Yoga Institute in Lethbridge, Alberta, Gillian Goertz has seen hundreds of women derive both strength and pleasure from the variety of yoga classes they offer, including their popular prenatal and mother-and-baby programs.

"The benefits of yoga during a time of physical transition, such as pregnancy, are unparalleled," she says. "Yoga helps prepare your body and mind for the athletic event that is birth."

Page agrees that practicing yoga during pregnancy helps to gently strengthen the abdominals (to be in optimum condition for labour) and the lower back muscles (often strained due to the weight of the baby). She says athletic pregnant women in particular can benefit from yoga to prevent injuries. The stretches inherent in yoga also

help prepare muscles, joints and ligaments for the postural demands in late pregnancy.

Yoga, as a prenatal exercise, helps women relax and often has a calming effect on stressed, tired and apprehensive mothers-to-be.

Carrie Jansen is an active mother with two young daughters and an infant son. During her recent pregnancy, one of her daily rituals was strapping her two kids into the jogging stroller and leashing up the dog for a half-hour run, but she also looked forward to the relaxation that her twice-weekly yoga classes provided.

"Yoga gave me a peaceful time to enjoy my pregnancy, which can be hard to find during a hectic day. It also relieved a lot of tension and sore muscles."

## If birth is the marathon, yoga is the trainer

There are many parallels between giving birth and practicing yoga. In fact, many postures mimic labour and birth positions, including the aptly named birthing squat. Being comfortable in yoga postures can help ease pain during labour and gently guide



the baby into the right position for birth.

"I did lots of birthing squats to help me dilate during labour and managed my pain with squats and lunges. My experience with yoga helped me relax and provided me with muscle tone in my abdominals that I really drew on," says Jansen.

Proper breathing is also key in both yoga and labour. Though standard prenatal classes may cover some breathing techniques, yoga is really the mother of all disciplines when it comes to capitalizing on the power of breathing.

"Yoga is breathing-centred, meditative and requires a focused mental state. It prepares women to be in control of their bodies and cope with the pain of labour," says Page, who is also a certified doula, a specially trained support person for the birthing mother.

### At some point, you've got to get out of bed

Once their babies are born, many active mothers are eager to resume athletic pursuits, but it's important to sufficiently recover from giving birth. Yoga can be a gentle way to regain strength and relieve the stress of being a new mom.

"As you're healing from the birth, it's important to re-stabilize the core muscles and introduce exercise slowly," says Page. "Yoga helps expedite the healing process while offering an opportunity to connect with your baby."

With the multitude of mother-and-baby yoga classes sprouting up across the country, women can even multi-task by getting a good workout and soothing their babies at the same time. Infants are often part of the exercises and act as counter-weight.

Many women who start practicing yoga prenatally tend to progress into postnatal yoga and often keep it up after their babies have grown out of it, according to Gorz.

"People who get into yoga during pregnancy seem to find a way to integrate it into their lifestyles even after their babies are born. The balance and well being that it provides is not something that's easy to give up," she says. «

Yoga expert Gillian Goerz recommends holding each posture for as long as your body is comfortable, from 30 seconds to five minutes. Postures should feel challenging but not painful.

### BIRTHING SQUAT

In a deep squatted position, flatten your back and feet, lengthen your spine, and pull in your abdominals; place your hands palm to palm and pull your shoulders down to your spine.



**Benefits during pregnancy:** This position relaxes the pelvic floor, builds strength and endurance in the legs, strengthens the back, improves posture and is a good position to practice breathing for labour.

**Benefits during labour:** This is a traditional birthing position. It helps the baby move down into the pelvic outlet and can help open the outlet up to 3 mm or 10 per cent. It requires endurance; if necessary, use an exercise ball, a birthing stool, a partner or a ledge for support.

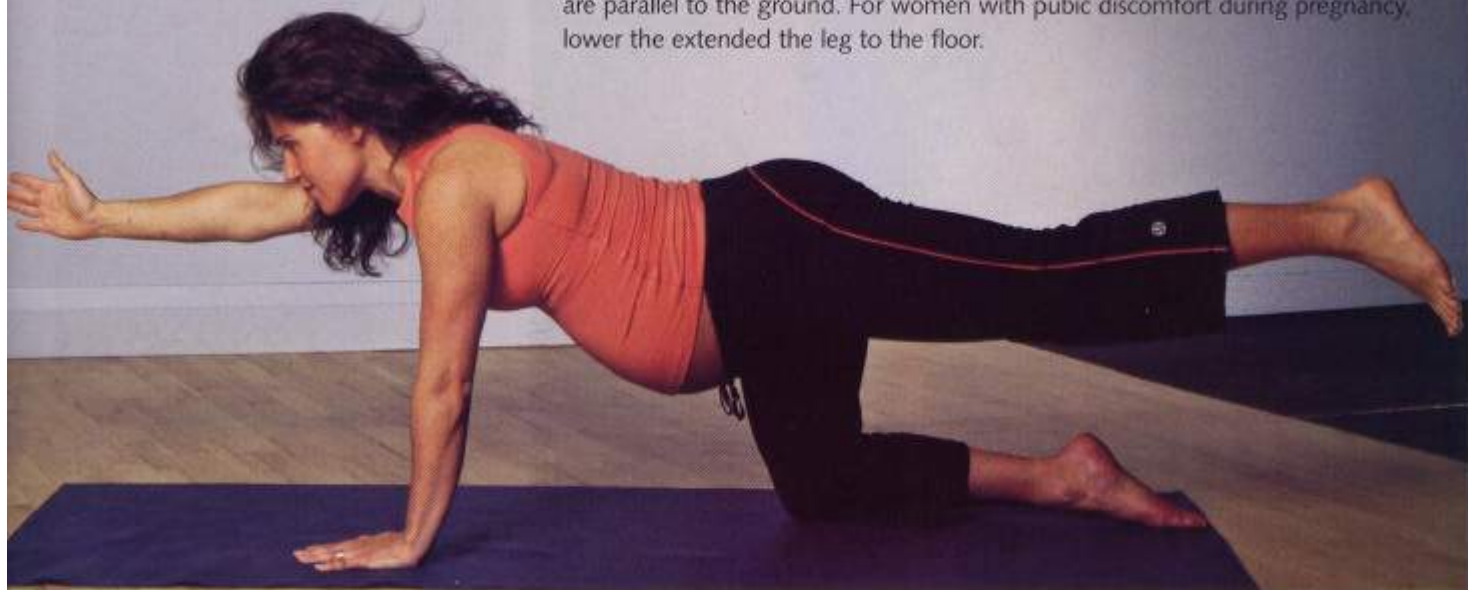
**Benefits postnatally:** This is a good position for doing Kegel exercises, regaining strength and opening up the hips that may be tight after birth.



## HANDS AND KNEES STRETCH AND REACH

(a fitness-based yoga posture)

Crouching on hands and knees, extend one leg and the opposite arm until they are parallel to the ground. For women with pubic discomfort during pregnancy, lower the extended leg to the floor.



**Benefits during pregnancy:** Helps strengthen the middle and lower back and abdominals.

**Benefits during labour:** Any exercise on the hands and knees helps relieve the pain of back labour. Adding a rocking movement manipulates the pelvic outlet and helps the baby move into position for birth.

**Benefits postnatally:** This position helps strengthen the weakened abdominals and is another excellent position to practice Kegel exercises.

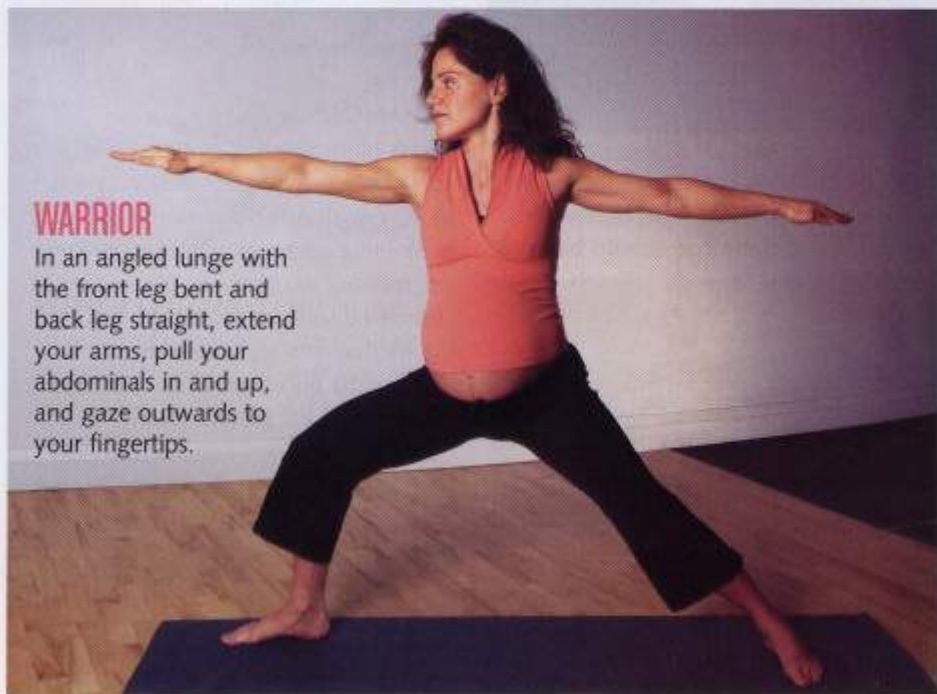
## GOOD READING

*The Women's Book of Yoga and Health: A Lifelong Guide to Wellness*, by Linda Sparrowe and Patricia Walden, published by Shambhala, \$34.95

This timely book contains numerous yoga sequences and is designed to be a reference guide for female practitioners. It includes comprehensive sections on pregnancy, menstruation, depression, back problems, menopause and more.

## WARRIOR

In an angled lunge with the front leg bent and back leg straight, extend your arms, pull your abdominals in and up, and gaze outwards to your fingertips.



**Benefits during pregnancy:** This position strengthens the quadriceps and hamstrings, creates a greater awareness of posture, relaxes the pelvic floor and opens up the hip flexors.

**Benefits during labour:** Modify the position with the help of a partner by elevating your front leg on a chair and add rocking. This position helps relax the pelvic floor and encourages the baby to move down and change position.

**Benefits postnatally:** Women should be able to now hold the lunge a little longer and add Kegel exercises, which strengthen the weakened pelvic floor muscles. Incorporate the baby by holding and rocking her.