

## Yoga In Pregnancy: A Blessing for Motherhood

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Yoga during pregnancy is a multi-dimensional practice that prepares a woman physically, mentally, emotionally, and intellectually to face the challenges of pregnancy. These challenges manifest as both happiness and stress, and Yoga serves as a skilful means to calm the mind. Pregnancy brings about significant internal and external changes in a woman's body, often creating obstacles in daily life. Practicing Yoga can help women navigate these transformations smoothly. Engaging in Yoga during pregnancy offers numerous benefits for both the mother and the unborn child. Yoga helps to soothe the mind, refocus energy, and prepare the woman physiologically and psychologically for labour. Various breathing techniques provide valuable neuromuscular control, aiding in the coordinated relaxation and contraction of the uterus. Specific asanas (postures) mentioned in Ayurvedic and Yogic texts are safe for pregnant women, as they require minimal energy while offering significant benefits. Scientific studies and published research support the positive effects of Yoga during pregnancy. Yoga practice, including physical postures and breathing techniques, has been shown to minimize pregnancy complications such as pregnancy-induced hypertension, intrauterine growth restriction (IUGR), and preterm delivery. Unlike Western exercises that focus on repetitive muscle contractions Yogic exercises, involve static contractions, maintaining muscle tension without continuous motion. A structured approach to prenatal Yoga can contribute to improved birth weight, reduced incidence of preterm labour, and decreased risk of IUGR, all with minimal or no complications.

**Keywords:** Pregnancy, Yoga, Asanas, Pranayama, Birth weight, Labour, Preterm

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## Introduction

*Yoga* is a mind-body practice that originated in India and is increasingly recognized and utilized in developed nations as a health intervention for various immunological, neuromuscular, psychological, and pain-related conditions.[1] It encompasses traditional physical postures and may also integrate additional elements such as breathing exercises and meditation. *Yoga* influences nervous system regulation and enhances physiological functions, including immune, endocrine, neurotransmitter, and cardiovascular systems. Additionally, it promotes psychological well-being by increasing positive mood states and optimism while also improving physical fitness aspects such as strength, flexibility, and endurance.[2]

On the other hand, pregnancy is a significant phase in a woman's life that brings profound physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual transformations, lasting a lifetime. To maintain balance across these dimensions, *Yoga* can be considered essential for ensuring a smooth and complication-free pregnancy. During pregnancy, a woman undergoes both internal and external changes. The confirmation of pregnancy often brings feelings of fear and apprehension. Childbirth is one of the most remarkable experiences for a woman, encompassing both physical and emotional aspects that are deeply interconnected. For many women, labour is accompanied by anxiety, fear, and discomfort. These changes can create challenges in a pregnant woman's daily life, and practicing *Yoga* during pregnancy can help her navigate these transitions with greater ease and resilience.[3]

The *Yoga* we know today originated in India in the 1820s as a mystical practice, traditionally practiced by men in secluded forests. In the early 1920s, researcher Jagannath Gune transformed *Yoga* into a health and wellness exercise by establishing the Kaivalyadhama Health and *Yoga* Research Center in India. It wasn't until the late 1930s that *Yoga* gained global recognition, and women were permitted to learn and participate. Today, *Yoga* is a widely recognized form of exercise, with over 36 million adults practicing it in the United States.[4] This number almost doubled between 2002 and 2012 and increased by over 50% in the last four years. Over 70% of yoga practitioners are women, most of whom are of reproductive age.[5]

In the West, yoga is primarily associated with *Hatha Yoga*, the physical practice of *Yoga*. Various styles are popular in the United States and Europe, including *Anusara*, *Ananda*, *Ashtanga*, *Bikram*, *Iyengar*, *Kundalini*, *Power*, *Vinyasa Flow*, *Viniyoga*, and *Yin*. While each style has its unique approach, they all share fundamental principles, emphasizing breathing exercises and meditation.[6] Goals of antenatal care to reduce maternal and perinatal mortality and morbidity rates, improve the physical and mental health of women and children, prepare the women for labor, lactation, and care of her infant, detect early and treat properly complicated conditions that could endanger the life or impair the health of the mother or the fetus.[7]

### Does Pregnancy Cause Stress?

Pregnancy is a unique and transformative period for a woman and her family, marked by significant physical, emotional, and lifestyle changes. These changes can introduce new stressors, particularly for women who are already managing responsibilities at home and work. When stress accumulates to overwhelming levels, it may have adverse effects on both the mother and the developing foetus.[8]

During pregnancy, women experience distinct physiological and psychological changes, often accompanied by physical and emotional challenges. Managing these changes effectively is essential for overall well-being. A mother's health and quality of life play a crucial role in ensuring positive pregnancy outcomes.[9]

Women experiencing high levels of stress may struggle to maintain healthy habits, which can negatively impact their pregnancy. They may neglect proper nutrition or turn to unhealthy coping mechanisms like smoking, alcohol, or illicit drugs—behaviours that have been linked to low birth weight. Therefore, it's crucial to manage maternal stress and provide expecting mothers with effective coping strategies to navigate the inevitable challenges and changes that arise during pregnancy. This approach can enhance their quality of life and promote optimal infant health and development. Physical exercise plays an important role in stress management and can help alleviate various pregnancy-related conditions, including oedema, gestational hypertension or diabetes, mood swings, musculoskeletal discomfort, aches, and weight gain. [10]

### Benefits of Practicing Yoga During Pregnancy

*Yoga* offers numerous benefits for both the mother and the unborn child. It helps calm the mind, channel energy effectively, and psychologically prepare the mother for labour. Certain *Yoga* postures create more space in the pelvis, facilitating the smooth expulsion of the foetus. Additionally, various poses can aid in relieving tension around the cervix and birth canal, potentially accelerating the labour process and promoting a faster recovery after delivery.[11] Breathing techniques in *Yoga* play a crucial role in achieving coordinated relaxation and contraction of the uterus, making labour more manageable. Proper antenatal preparation through *Yoga* and meditation (*Dhyana*) can help most women experience a safer and smoother labour, allowing them to embrace childbirth with a sense of fulfilment. Given that *Yoga* is deeply rooted in our culture, it should be integrated into the pregnancy routine for overall well-being.

## Materials and Methods

Literature searches were performed to identify all review papers on *Yoga* and pregnancy. The following databases were utilized: CINAHL, PubMed, Medline, ProQuest, and "Evidence-Based Medicine Reviews: Cochrane DSR, ACP Journal Club, DARE, and CCTR." The search terms "*Yoga*" and "pregnancy" were combined using the Boolean operator "AND" to find articles containing both terms. Additionally, a search was conducted using the terms "*Yoga* AND [post-natal OR postpartum]." The reference lists of the identified articles were also reviewed for other relevant publications. According to the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, among the nine exercises commonly done during pregnancy, walking was most popular (41%) & *Yoga* was ranked fourth, being practiced by only 7%.

### First Trimester Asanas[12]

#### 1. *Utthitatrikasan* (Extended triangle pose)

It strengthens the pelvic floor muscles, thighs and calf muscles. Increases the flexibility of spine and improves digestion.

#### 2. *Virbhadrasan* (Warrior pose)

It stretches the groin area, strengthens the body and back muscles and tones up the lower body. Increases stamina and flexibility and relieves backache.

#### 3. *Vrikshasan* (Tree pose)

It stretches the legs, back and arms which invigorates the body. It helps to improve concentration.

### Second Trimester Asanas[13]

#### 1. *Vajrasan* (Thunderbolt pose)

This asana enhances digestive system which increases the energy uptake. Alters blood flow and nervous system impulses in the pelvic region. Relieves stomach ailments like hyperacidity and it is the only asana that can be practiced after taking meals.

#### 2. *Matsyakridasan* (Flapping fish pose)

Stimulates digestion and relieves constipation. It relaxes the nerves of legs and this is an ideal asana for relaxed sleep. It improves blood circulation.

#### 3. *Marjariasan* (Cat stretch pose)

Is very helpful in toning the female reproductive system and muscles of pelvis. This asana increases the flexibility of neck, spine and shoulders muscles which are essential for bearing down efforts during labour.

#### 4. *Tadasan* (Mountain pose)

Stretches the entire spine and helps to clear the congestion of spinal nerves. It also helps in developing physical and mental balance. It stretches and strengthens the rectus-abdominus muscle which is an accessory muscle for bearing down.

#### 5. *Bhadrasan* (Gracious pose)

This asana benefits the digestive system and helps in relieving various stomach ailments. It helps in toning the muscles of female pelvic region. Along with meditation, it relieves mental stress.

#### 6. *Kati Chakrasan* (waist rotating pose)

Tones up the muscles of waist, back and hips. It induces the feeling of lightness and relieves physical and mental stress.

### Third Trimester Asanas[14]

#### 1. *Ardhatitaliasan* (Half butterfly)

Is an excellent asana for loosening of hip joints, which enables fast and easy delivery.

#### 2. *Pornatitaliasan* (Full butterfly)

Tones up pelvic girdle. It relieves tension from inner thigh muscles and removes tiredness of legs. This asana increases stretching ability of perineum.

### 3. Chakkichalanasana (Churning mill pose)

Is an excellent asana for toning the nerves and muscles of pelvis and abdomen and prepare them for delivery.

### 4. Utthanasan (Squat and Rise pose)

This Asana strengthens the muscles of back, uterus, thighs and ankles. It tones up the pelvic girdle and this asana is equivalent to sweeping floor. Thus, enables fast and easy delivery.

## Pranayama Benefits

### 1. Anulom Vilom Pranayama

- Strengthens both the body and mind.
- During labor, holding the breath for extended periods can assist in pushing.
- Increases oxygen intake, which is then delivered to the fetus, promoting its health.

### 2. Bhramari Pranayama

- An effective breathing exercise to release tension, anger, and calm the mind.
- Especially beneficial for pregnant women, as it aids in controlling breath during labor, facilitating a smoother childbirth experience.

## Post-Natal Asanas

Start with leg raising exercises from 5th Day

1. Hastha Padangusthasana
2. Konasana
3. Hastha Padasana
4. Parvathasana
5. Paschimottanasana
6. Sarvangasana
7. Halasana
8. Shalabhasana
9. Makarasana

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper suggests that a prenatal Yoga program offers significant benefits during pregnancy, labor, and birth outcomes. The emerging body of research indicates improvements in psychological aspects during pregnancy and labor (e.g., quality of life and self-efficacy),

Physical and pain-related measures during labor (e.g., discomfort and pain), and birth-related factors (e.g., birth weight and preterm births). The only adverse health outcome reported was uterine contractions, which can be monitored and managed with a modified approach and appropriate reduction in activity.

Overall, the evidence supporting the suitability of Yoga for pregnancy is positive. However, due to limitations in methodological analysis and the relatively small number of published trials, it is not possible to draw firm conclusions. Our recommendations encourage collaboration between researchers and Yoga practitioners to develop effective, standardized programs that can also be evaluated through evidence-based research.

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