



Prenatal Yoga Teacher Training
Safe and Unsafe Postures and Activities

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Introduction

Many women today want to continue their yoga practice during their pregnancy. And with good reason. Prenatal yoga helps women before and after they give birth, as well as during the birthing process. The breathing and body awareness developed through yoga helps women stay connected to their changing bodies. The gentle stretches and postures help relieve back pain common during pregnancy, and help develop the strength and stamina necessary for giving birth. Yoga helps develop an overall healthier body, which then makes it easier to bounce back after birth.

However, there often are not specific prenatal yoga classes available to women. Often pregnant women will show up in your regular yoga classes, so it is important that you know how to provide them with a fulfilling and safe yoga class, and one that doesn't take anything away from your other students. In this training, you will learn which postures are safe for pregnant students and how to modify typical yoga postures to make them safe. After the birth, special care is also needed to help the mother recover completely.

In this training, you will learn about the benefits of yoga during pregnancy, as well as learning how to teach a variety of asanas to your prenatal students and how to modify many postures to make them safe for pregnant women. This training will also review general anatomy of hatha yoga, along with providing information about the changes that occur throughout pregnancy.

In this section, please remember to review the information regarding safe and unsafe postures for prenatal students, as well as the information regarding specific stages of pregnancy and the benefits of yoga for pregnant women.

Benefits of Prenatal Yoga

Improves strength, flexibility and endurance.

Yoga improves and balance strength, flexibility and endurance in all major muscle groups, preparing expectant moms for the physical demands of labor and child birth.

Reduces back pain and sciatica.

The stretching in yoga helps relieve tension in the muscles in your low back, while also stretching the muscles in the hips and hamstrings, which, if tight, can place strain on the low back. Additionally, the increase in body awareness helps you be more conscious of how you move in daily life and how those movements may affect your back.

Relieves stress and anxiety.

The focused breathing exercises in yoga help to eliminate mental chatter and relieve stress in the mind and body. Yoga helps you remain in the here and now rather than worrying about giving birth or about the changes that will be happening in your life once the baby is born.

Improves sleep.

Yoga helps relax your mind and body preparing you for a better night's sleep. Reduces swelling and inflammation around your joints. A regular and consistent yoga practice improves and promotes the circulation of blood and oxygen throughout your body, which helps reduce swelling and inflammation around ankles and wrists.

Aids in digestion.

As your baby grows there is less room for the organs of your digestive tract. This can lead to indigestion. The stretching of yoga helps promote circulation and digestion.

Helps maintain good posture.

Yoga teaches you how to keep your pelvis in a neutral position and lengthen through your spine to maintain proper posture. During pregnancy, many women begin to have an excessive pelvic tilt due to the weight of the baby, causing a sway in the low back and leading to back pain. Yoga helps women notice changes in their center of gravity and find correct posture throughout their pregnancy.

Differences in Yoga Practice by Trimester

Yoga in the First Trimester

According to the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, the same physical activity that was done before pregnancy can continue in the first trimester of pregnancy. During this time, it's most important that a woman be careful as to what she puts into her body (i.e. no smoking, drinking or use of certain medications). However, that said, it is important to know if one of your students is pregnant to ensure that she doesn't overdo any exercise, or become too overheated. Students can continue in their regular yoga class at this time (unless it's hot yoga), but may want to begin looking into prenatal classes. For those who are practicing hot yoga, recommend that they start a non-heated class.

Practicing yoga during the first trimester helps women to slow down and realize the changes to their bodies and can also help with relief from morning sickness or back pain, as well as to regulate fluctuating hormones. The first trimester is a good time to get your student to begin to slow down and really listen to any cues of their body, so they don't overdo their exercise.

Yoga in the Second Trimester

During this period, a woman's body begins to produce more of the hormone Relaxin, which begins to loosen ligaments to prepare the body for birth. Overstretching can damage these relaxed parts, so you need to check that your pregnant students are not overstretching. Generally, morning sickness will be over for most of your students at this stage, so they may feel better and more like exercising than in the first trimester.

As a woman's belly grows, the more adaptations you will need to make. This means to make sure any twisting is done at the shoulder/chest level (not twisting at the belly), no lying on the back (lie on the side), no intense backbends, no full inversions, and have the student step rather than jump.

Yoga in the Third Trimester

During this period many physical activities can become a little more difficult for women, as the baby takes up more space, giving the woman a little less room to breathe fully and move easily. Now is a good time to remind the student to take it easy rather than try to be an overachiever. If a woman is new to your class and in her third trimester, it is most important that she has clearance from her doctor to practice yoga.

Breathing exercises can be very useful at this point, and can help with the birthing process, as well as relief stress. Some prenatal yoga positions that are especially helpful in the third trimester are hip openers such as: seated hip opener (ankle to knee), pigeon, and warrior 2. Cat/cow (spinal flexes) will help with back tension and may help the baby get into proper position.

Make sure your third trimester students avoid jumping, twists from the belly, deep back bends, lying on their back and any strenuous abdominal strengthening exercises.

It's important that your students really listen to their bodies at this point and to stop doing certain exercises whenever they feel discomfort or shortness of breath. Now is a good time to slow down their practice, so they are better able to listen to the needs of their bodies.

Safe and Unsafe Postures During Pregnancy

There are so many yoga poses that are safe and beneficial during pregnancy. Why take a chance with others? Below is a list of poses that are safe and poses that are contraindicated during pregnancy. As always, listen to your own body and follow its wisdom. If any pose causes pain, or simply feels wrong, modify or stop doing it altogether.

Yoga positions not suitable for pregnant women:

- Full back bends (too much lumbar spine pressure)
- Breath holding
- Child's Pose with legs together (use modified Child's pose with legs apart)
- Double leg lifts (too much pressure on lumbar spine)
- Forward folds with head down (Use props or place hands on knees to keep from folding completely down).
- Front lying postures (cobra, locust, pigeon)
- Jumps (too jarring on the placenta)
- Overstretching (could lead to instability of hips, ankles, knees)
- Inversions (placenta at top of uterus could dislodge, umbilical cord can twist)
- Full body twists (too much pressure on the placenta)
- Low spinal twists (too much pressure on the placenta)
- Supine postures - lying flat on back (see back side of this handout)

Yoga positions suitable for pregnant women:

- Mountain Pose (Tadasana – standing tall)
- Sunflower warm-up (stand in straddle, feet pointing out, sweep arms towards floor while squatting down, then sweep arms up when coming back up)
- Swinging arms warm-up
- Chest Expansion (hands clasped behind back, roll shoulders back, opening chest)
- All fours
- Spinal flexes – all fours rounding spine, then looking up, pulling shoulders back, arching
- Spinal Balance – from all fours, extending arm and opposite leg (repeat other side)
- Child's pose (modified with knees spread, big toes touching)
- Modified Forward Fold (use block or chair or place hands on knees, look towards ground)
- Side plank (modified with one knee down)
- Kneeling plank (top of push up with knees down, hold, press back to modified child's)
- Hero's Pose (sitting back on heels)
- Pigeon
- Butterfly

- Sun worshipper (sitting on heels, bring hands behind, roll shoulders back and open chest)
- Frog (like child's pose, but hips lifted, chest lowered towards ground)
- Half lotus
- Seated straddle
- Down dog (or half dog against the wall)
- Chair pose (squat down like sitting in a chair, arms at shoulder height)
- Warrior 2 (and side angle poses) using chair for support during late pregnancy
- Triangle
- Dancer's Pose (stand on right foot, bend left knee, hold left foot in left hand, bring left heel towards buttocks, repeat on other side)
- Hamstring stretch
- Seated one leg staff pose (sit with one leg extended, bend right knee, bring foot to left thigh, sit towards front of sitting bones, bring arms to shoulder height, reach forward, lowering belly towards space between two legs – repeat on other side.
- Hip opener (sit on chair, cross right ankle to left thigh – just above knee, fold forward, bringing belly to open space between legs)

Special Cases

Some women will be advised to not exercise at all during pregnancy. These include women with the following conditions:

- Risk of preterm labor
- Vaginal bleeding
- Premature rupture of membranes

Joints and Overstretching

The hormones produced during pregnancy cause the ligaments that support the joints to become more mobile and more at risk of injury. Avoid jerky, bouncy or high-impact motions that can cause injury. The hormone relaxin makes a pregnant woman's joints and muscles more supple and flexible than usual. Help your students avoid the temptation to overstretch loose joints, including hips, ankles and knees, as this could cause future instability.

Heart Rate

The extra weight carried during pregnancy will force the body to work harder than before pregnancy. Exercise increases the flow of oxygen and blood to the muscles being worked and away from other parts of the body, so it's important not to overdo it.

Why No Supine Postures? (Lying on Back)

During the second trimester the uterus will become heavy enough to compress the vena cava. The vena cava is a large vein that brings oxygen poor blood back

from the legs to the heart for re-oxygenation. It flows from legs to heart along the right side of the spine. Like a large rock sitting on a garden hose, the uterus sitting on the vena cava will cut off the blood as it tries to return to the heart. Less blood returns to the heart. Consequently, there will be less oxygenated blood for the heart to pump back out to the body. The cardiac output drops. This causes blood pressure to drop. Lowered blood pressure reduces the amount of blood flowing into the placenta.

Hypotension from obstruction of the vena cava makes many women dizzy and nauseous. Reduced blood supply to the placenta cuts off the baby's lifeline and can theoretically cause harm. Clinical studies have shown ominous looking changes in fetal heart rate patterns in response to supine hypotension when pregnant women were placed flat on their backs.

For this reason, lying supine, or flat on the back, for any yoga posture is strongly discouraged. Lying on the side avoids the problem and is much safer.

Why Back Problems During Pregnancy?

The normal "S" shape of the spine allows optimum strength and efficiency of movement. Any force that shifts the body's center of gravity can change this natural curvature, producing stress upon the spine that can weaken it.

During pregnancy, the weight of the enlarged uterus in front shifts a woman's center of gravity back over her heels. This progressive lordosis or "swayback" effect increases the lumbar curvature, throws the body off balance, and leads to the chronic low back pain of pregnancy. The head and neck compensate by flexing and slumping forward.

Spinal Flexes (cat/cow) help to relax the lumbar muscles and often help. Modified Child's pose and Frog are also beneficial. Finally, Mountain pose can help you become aware of your spine and posture in relation to the forces of gravity, and how to hold your body in a healthy posture.

When to Stop

Pregnant women should stop yoga practice and call their doctor if they have any of the following symptoms:

- Vaginal bleeding
- Lasting dizziness
- Increased shortness of breath
- Chest pain
- Calf pain or swelling
- Uterine contractions
- Decreased fetal movement
- Fluid leaking from the vagina

Safe and Unsafe Activities in General

Exercise, in general, is good for expectant moms and the developing baby. However, there are some activities that they should avoid during pregnancy to ensure their baby's safety. Before pregnant women engage in any physical activity, it is important to visit with a health care provider to discuss their individual situation and evaluate together what is safe.

Below is a list of activities that may warrant restrictions or other specific recommendations from a health care provider:

Running, Jogging and Pregnancy: Runners who continue exercising during pregnancy tend to gain less weight, have leaner babies and shorter labors. If someone is experiencing any pregnancy complications, they will probably be advised to stop jogging. Have students check with their health care provider for specific recommendations related to running and jogging.

Bicycling, Spinning and Pregnancy: Cycling or riding a stationary bike is a good source of exercise that increases heart rate without pounding the pavement. Cycling may become more uncomfortable during the last trimester when the belly has grown and it is a challenge to reach the handle bars. Pregnant women should avoid riding off the road or when the pavement is wet, both of which increase your chance of having an accident.

Weight Lifting and Pregnancy: If someone has a history of miscarriage or pregnancy complications, their physician may request that they avoid weight lifting. Have students check with their health care provider for specific recommendations related to weight lifting.

Skiing and Pregnancy: Both water and snow skiing have high incidents of falls and pose significant risk of injuries. Both water and snow skiing are not recommended during pregnancy.

Scuba Diving and Pregnancy: Scuba divers must decompress as they return to the surface of the water. Developing babies may have difficulty decompressing. Some studies report a higher incidence of birth defects and preterm birth among women who dive during pregnancy. Scuba diving is not recommended during pregnancy.

High Impact Aerobics and Pregnancy: Aerobic exercise, in general, is healthy for pregnant women and their developing babies. Low impact aerobics with a certified instructor is very beneficial. High impact aerobics is not recommended because of the extensive jumping, hopping and bouncing during the routine. A woman's center of gravity has shifted which may affect her balance and coordination, making her more susceptible to injury. Women may be asked to

avoid aerobic exercise if they have a history of miscarriage or if they have complications with the pregnancy. Have students check with their health care provider for specific recommendations related to aerobic exercise.









Contact Sports and Pregnancy: Women who are pregnant are encouraged to avoid activities that may allow direct trauma to the abdomen. Contact sports pose a significant risk of trauma to the abdomen; therefore it is recommended that women avoid contact sports during pregnancy.

Activities With Risks of Falling: Ice skating, roller blading, rock climbing, and other activities that have higher risks of falling should be avoided during pregnancy. Have prenatal students check with their health care provider for specific recommendations about a hobby or activity that poses a risk of falling.

Exercise at High Altitudes and Pregnancy: Some studies suggest a connection between living in high altitudes of 8,000 feet or more and pregnancy complications. Exercise at altitudes over 7,500 feet has been identified as unsafe. Although there are certainly women who live at altitudes above 7,500 feet who have been pregnant, exercised and had healthy babies. Have prenatal students check with their health care provider for specific recommendations related to exercising in high altitudes.

Yoga Posture Modifications for Prenatal Students

Regular Posture	Prenatal Modified Posture
Chest Expander 	Chest Expander (no forward fold) 
Lunge 	Lunge (both hands to one side) 
Extended Angle 	Extended Angle (no bind) 
Warrior 3 	Warrior 3 (use chair for balance) 
King Dancer 	King Dancer (no arch to back) 

<p>Camel</p> 	<p>Camel (no arch to back)</p> 
<p>Lying Pigeon</p> 	<p>Pigeon (no belly lying)</p> 
<p>Locust</p> 	<p>Locust (no belly lying – use chair)</p> 
<p>Child's Pose</p> 	<p>Child's (spread knees, hands forward)</p> 

REMEMBER UNSAFE POSITIONS FOR PREGNANT WOMEN

- Full back bends
- Breath holding
- Child's Pose with legs together
- Double leg lifts
- Forward folds with head down
- Front lying postures
- Jumps
- Overstretching
- Inversions
- Full body twists
- Low spinal twists
- Supine postures - lying flat on back

If any pose causes pain, or feels wrong to the student, modify or stop doing it.