

Power Through Your Pregnancy

Women hoping for a smooth birth find that yoga delivers

B Y L I S A M A R I A

When Becky Sorenson found out she was pregnant with twins, she was thrilled—until she went into preterm labor and had to be on bed rest for the last 10 weeks of her pregnancy. She credits her yoga practice with getting her through that tough time.

“Yoga gave me the tools to focus my attention, turn to my breathing and find some peace.”

Yoga is rapidly becoming the leading exercise of choice for pregnant women because of its many positive effects and low risk of injury. Research indicates that yoga increases strength, flexibility and balance. Yoga may reduce stress, lower blood pressure, relieve mild forms of depression, improve sleep and increase energy levels. In addition, certain yogic breathing techniques can be effective in increasing oxygen flow to the baby. Yoga is found to be helpful during labor to reduce tension, relax the hips and pelvis and instill calm and confidence, making delivery easier for the mom-to-be.

Dr. Christine Anderson, producer of Dr. Christine Anderson’s *Dynamic Prenatal Yoga* DVD, is an LA chiropractor and yoga teacher. Affectionately known as “Dr. Chris,” she specializes in pregnancy and pediatrics. “Yoga during pregnancy can help women keep their weight gain down to a minimum, give them an improved attitude,



Advanced yogi Amara Teresa Hastings, eight months pregnant, practices yoga with Annie Carpenter at Yoga Works. Here she demonstrates tree pose.

PHOTOS: NATALIE AVAKIAN

help with shorter, easier labors and decrease medical intervention—like Cesareans and forceps—which also means less likelihood of fetal distress and a faster recovery after birth. Yoga gives you the benefit of less pain during pregnancy, such as backaches and other discomforts, so it keeps you healthier and happier.” She laughs, “Also, women who do yoga tend to give birth on or before their due dates!”

An ancient system of self-realization, yoga has a powerful effect on physical health and well-being. The physical postures (*asana*), breathing exercises (*pranayama*), meditation practices (*dhyana*) and chanting (*mantra*) can be of immense benefit to the student, especially if there’s a little one growing inside of her. Becky’s prenatal yoga practice included all of these tools. “I felt more aware of the physical changes... I felt more connected emotionally... I felt more connected to life than ever. And spiritually, I felt a greater sense of peace and well-being.”

A major benefit of prenatal yoga is learning how to breathe for pregnancy and labor. Dr. Chris explains, “With yogic breathing during pregnancy, you’re getting more oxygen and so is your baby, which is crucial to development. Breathing shallowly through your mouth in a hyperventilation-type of breath sends alarm signals throughout the body. During labor, that deep, nasal breathing—pranayama through the nose—is going to send calming signals to the body.”

New information suggests that the main reason women fail to progress in labor is because of obsessive, chaotic thinking known as “monkey mind.” Laboring women get so distracted by their thoughts that the ability to focus on the project at hand—giving birth—is drastically diminished. Dr.

Chris emphasizes, “You’ve got to get out of your head to let the labor process unfold. Prenatal yoga helps you do that because you’re using the tools that you’ve been working on in class, which is why labor times are generally decreased in women who do yoga.”

It’s important to find a yoga class designed for expectant mothers, as some yoga postures may be difficult or dangerous to do during pregnancy. Experts recommend getting consent from your doctor or midwife before starting yoga, then locating a prenatal class with an instructor specifically trained to teach pregnant women. “Start slowly and listen to your body. It’s the perfect time to get in tune with your body, with yourself and with your baby,” says Dr. Chris. It’s a great initial step to becoming a parent.”

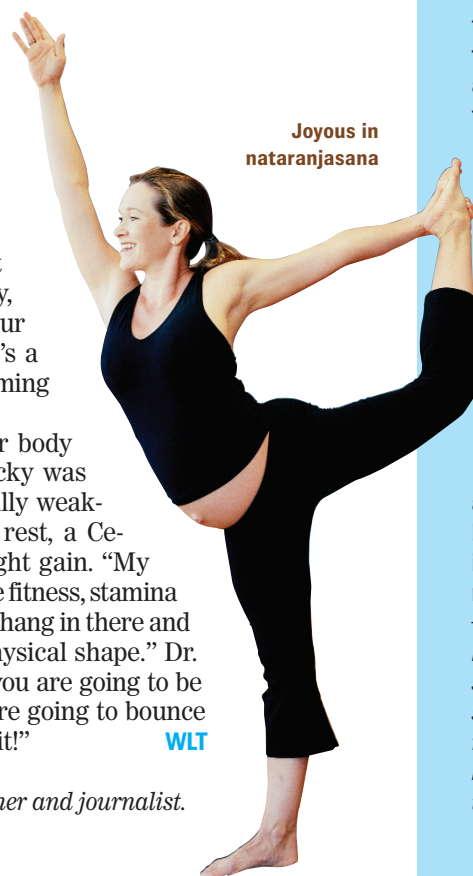
Ready to change your body back after delivery? Becky was emotionally and physically weakened by long-term bed rest, a Cesarean section and weight gain. “My yoga practice gave me the fitness, stamina and fortitude I needed to hang in there and later to get back into physical shape.” Dr. Chris agrees, “Because you are going to be more physically fit, you’re going to bounce back a lot easier. Just do it!”

WLT

Lisa Maria is a yoga teacher and journalist.



Amara demonstrates pigeon pose (*kapotasana*)



Joyous in nataranjasana

What To Do

Gurutej Kaur has been teaching popular pre- and postnatal yoga classes in LA for 15 years. Her videos and DVDs include *Prenatal Yoga* and *Postnatal Yoga*. She recommends these essential practices for pregnancy.

Pranayama (Breathwork)

Sitali Breath: To calm, cool and focus. Inhale through curled tongue (or tongue extended though lips). Exhale through the nose.

Left Nostril Breathing: To listen more effectively and to stay calm under stress. Block the right nostril. Breathe deeply through the left nostril only.

"O" Breath: This breath can be done during stressful moments, to collect thoughts and focus. Make an "O" of the mouth. Inhale and exhale through the "O."

Asana (Poses)

Squat (*Malasana*): “Women hate this pose! It gets their legs really strong so that they have the capacity to push with their thighs and not just with their perineum. They can choose to squat down when they’re in labor because they have very strong thighs to support them.” The number one pose for labor prep, squatting increases your hip flexibility like no other pose. During labor, it opens the pelvic bone a whopping 30 percent more than other positions, shortens the birth canal, reduces perineal tearing, uses gravity and gives you a clear view of your baby’s birth.

Tree Pose (*Vrksasana*): “I have women doing Tree Pose almost all the way until the end to increase balance. Because their center of gravity shifts, they’re forced to tune into themselves, to trust in themselves. One-legged positions are also good for stimulating the pituitary.” Apart from balance and concentration, Tree helps to strengthen your thighs, calves, ankles and back. It can also increase the flexibility of your hips and groin, relieve sciatica and reduce flat feet.

Baby Krishna: “As the baby starts coming down and is putting a lot of pressure on the woman’s pelvis at the end of pregnancy, this pose is one of the best.”

Dhyana (Meditation)

Meditation: “Extremely important! We do some meditations that have a mantra with them and we do some pranayama meditations, and I have chanting going all through the class.” Favorite mantras include “Sat Nam” (truth is my identity) and “Wahe Guru” (untranslatable mantra for ecstasy).

Please study with a prenatal yoga professional to be sure you are performing the practices correctly and safely. Practice with slow, deep breaths in a peaceful place. Or dare to squat while you’re waiting in line at the market or the bank. Remember, you’re training for the biggest event of your life!

Where To Go

BLESSINGS CENTER

Gurutej Kaur
1310 S. Carmona Ave., LA
323.930.2803
theblessingscenter.com

GOLDEN BRIDGE YOGA

6322 De Longpre Ave., LA
323.936.4172
goldenbridgeyoga.com

HOLLYWOOD HOLISTIC HOME BIRTH CENTER

Dr. Christine Anderson
1445 N. Gardner St., LA
323.436.2735, 323.51.BIRTH
kidchiropractic.com

LOS ANGELES ALLIANCE FOR CHILDHOOD

647 Devirian Pl., Altadena
626.798.1592
lchildhood.org

SACRED MOVEMENT

245 S. Main St., Venice
310.450.2603
sacredmovement.com

Check with your local yoga studios and fitness centers for pre- and postnatal yoga classes.