

# Yoga for Pregnancy

Strike a (pregnancy) pose!

Okay, you've booked the hospital, organised your midwife and now it's time to find a pre-natal yoga class. Mum-of-three and yoga teacher, Katie Brown guides you through the benefits of pre-natal yoga and a routine you can follow at home.

Yoga means union, and the bond between you and your child is probably the greatest union you will ever experience. Yoga has been used for centuries in eastern cultures as an aid to pregnancy and childbirth, but in recent years has gained much greater popularity in the west.

Not only will it help prepare your mind and body for labour and ease niggling pregnancy symptoms, you're also likely to meet other mums-to-be in your local area.

Don't worry, you don't have to be a contortionist, it's for every woman, whatever her level of flexibility, and in fact many women find Yoga for the first time when they are pregnant. It's about learning to focus on you and letting go. Postures can always be adapted to be more or less challenging depending on your flexibility, experience and stage of pregnancy.

## How pre-natal Yoga can help

Pre-natal Yoga works on a mental and physical level, creating a sense of peace and lightness in your mind and body. This inner peace is achieved by combining postures (asanas) and breathing practices (pranayama) with meditation and relaxation.



Practising pre-natal Yoga encourages us to focus inward – to be in our body. In pregnancy it's particularly important to be in tune with our bodies. With regular practice, you'll find it easier to adopt a feeling of deep relaxation and calmness. You'll also find it easier to let go of worries and take deep, full diaphragmatic breaths – increasing oxygen to all your cells and of course providing oxygen-rich blood to your baby through the placenta.

And most importantly regular practice will really pay off during your labour. This is a time when it's important to 'let go' and have faith in your body to birth your baby. The Yoga breathing practices should help you deal with your contractions and direct your focus to your baby. Pre-natal Yoga also includes chanting – this helps to release your throat, and will help to 'open' the body, releasing the pelvic floor muscle and letting go of tension.

Tension can cause your muscles to tighten and slow your labour, so Yoga also has the potential make your labour quicker and less painful.

During pregnancy, the hormone relaxin softens the ligament and muscles. This, combined with your ever-changing centre of gravity and your baby's weight, can lead to poor posture, which in turn can cause muscular aches and pains.

Regular Yoga practise will help improve your posture and maintain your general levels of fitness, strength and stamina.

Pranayama helps to calm the mind, ease tension and increase oxygen supply to both you and your baby. Some of the breathing practices have even been known to lower blood pressure and ease insomnia – a huge bonus if you're constantly running to the toilet during the night!

Asanas and Pranayama also help you cope with varying symptoms of pregnancy, such as sciatica and heart-burn. Relaxation and meditation encourage you to feel centred and instil a sense of balance and peace. These practices help to increase the release of oxytocin – a relaxing hormone, which is soothing for your nervous system, and will also help when your contractions begin.

And finally, Yoga should help your body to recover after childbirth and cope with those demanding first months with a newborn.

## Finding a pre-natal yoga class

Pre-natal Yoga classes tend to be very relaxing, so if you have good fitness levels and feel well, there's no reason why you can't begin attending classes as soon as you discover you're pregnant. However some teachers prefer you to be in your second trimester, or at least 14 weeks, before you attend classes. If you've experienced any blood loss, spotting or have a history of miscarriage, it is advisable to wait until you're in your second trimester, and if you're at all unsure, double check with your midwife or obstetrician.

It's always best to find a purely pre-natal Yoga class, as this is designed specifically for pregnancy and is also a great way to meet other new mums. But if that's not possible, you can attend a general class – just make sure you let the teacher know you are pregnant – or follow a routine at home.

There are several DVDs on the market, including my Yoga Babes – Yoga for Pregnancy and Birth [www.yogababes.com.au](http://www.yogababes.com.au) and this might be easier for you to do, especially if you already have children and find it hard to attend a class.

There are also national organisations such as the International Yoga Teachers' Association (IYTA) with a list of qualified yoga teachers on its website [www.iyta.org.au](http://www.iyta.org.au)

Below is a 10 minute Yoga workout that you can do each day to get you started on the path to pre-natal Yoga and beyond.

**Exercise one:** Marjarasana (Cat pose)

Come on to all fours, with your hands flat to the floor – fingers wide apart with your middle fingers pointing forward. Hands are under your shoulders and your knees are directly below your hips and your lower legs parallel. If your wrists are sore in this position, then curl them into fists.

Begin in the neutral position and then as you begin to exhale, tuck your tailbone under rolling each vertebra in turn, taking your chin towards your chest. Gently draw your navel to your spine, activating your abdominal muscles as you finish your exhalation. Then, as you begin your inhalation, draw your tailbone gently up towards the ceiling and uncurl your spine so you look forward. Repeat 5 times.



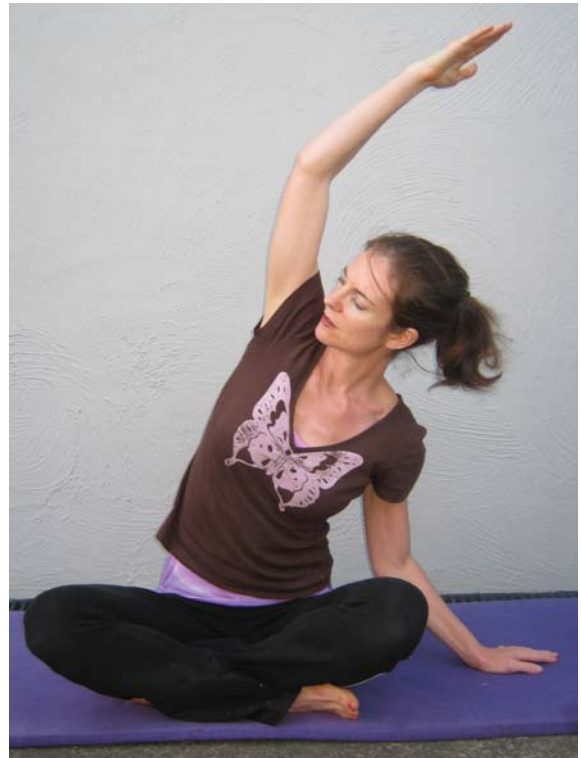
**Exercise two:** Baddha Konasana (also known as Butterfly/Cobbler's pose and Bound Angle Pose)

Sit with the soles of the feet drawn towards the perineum and together. To help lengthen the spine, you may wish to place a rolled up mat or blanket under the sitting bones. Place your hands around the feet and allow your knees to fall gently towards the floor, giving you a gentle stretch in the inner thighs, hips and spine. Hold for 10-20 seconds.



### Exercise three: Sitting side stretch

Sit in an easy cross-legged pose, with the spine straight. Then gently stretch your left arm up towards the ceiling as you inhale and as you exhale, draw the arm up and over the head towards the right side. Place your right hand down on the ground beside your hip, keeping both buttocks firmly on the ground. If you are a bit more flexible, you may be able to release the forearm towards the ground. Take a breath here and then inhale to release and repeat to the other side.



### Exercise four: Vrksasana (tree pose)

Stand upright in Tadasana (Mountain pose) and then take your right heel up to your left ankle. Your palms come together at your heart centre. Remain in this position with your eye gaze softly focussed at a point in front of you, which is not moving. If you wish to challenge yourself, begin to raise your right leg up, sole of your foot against your inner left calf or thigh and draw your right knee back, so it is in line with your left hip. Keep your hands at your heart centre or take them above your head to the Sahasrara centre – your crown centre and draw your elbows back from one another. Feel your heart centre open and release, focus your mind inward, allow all mental chatter to drift away, repeat to the other side. This is a good exercise to do before meditation.



**Exercise five: Mandukasana (frog pose)**

Sit down and bring your big toes together and your knees wide apart and begin to walk your hands forward. Cup your chin in your hands and remain in this position if you have high or low blood pressure, otherwise place your forehead either on your arms or on the mat and take your focus to your Ajna Chakra – the point between your eyebrows and allow this area to release. This is where our thoughts are processed, so as you release in this position, feel your mind begin to let go of any thoughts or concerns. Hold and gently begin to walk your hands over to your right side allow your left shoulder to sink down to the ground and then walk your hands over to the left side.



Gradually walk your hands back up to your body to come up to sitting. Take a few slow, deep Yogic breaths and you should feel ready to face the day!

Namaste.

Katie Brown

For more information or to contact Katie go to [www.yogababes.com.au](http://www.yogababes.com.au) or [www.motherme.com.au](http://www.motherme.com.au)

**Word of warning! In pre-natal Hatha Yoga the following postures and practices are not recommended:**

- \* **Double leg lifts (strong abdominal work)**
- \* **Extreme bends (side/back/twists etc)**
- \* **No long breath retention**
- \* **No inversions (e.g. shoulder stands) where your head is below your hips**
- \* **No squatting after week 34 if your baby is breech (feet first)**
- \* **No poses lying on the abdomen (e.g. Cobra)**

Lastly, after about weeks 16-20, lie on your side for relaxation (in the Yogic sleeping pose). This is because when you lie on your back, the weight of the uterus restricts the blood supply and can make you feel dizzy and nauseous.

- \* **As with all physical activities you do need to check with your midwife or obstetrician before starting Yoga.**