

Prenatal Yoga

A Gift You Can Give To Yourself

You have experienced the joy of finding out that you are pregnant and now you feel . . . different, in a surreal sort of way. You are likely thinking about your pregnancy all throughout your day. It may be a secret that you blissfully carry, or perhaps you feel too ill to experience much bliss at all. Maybe you are finally fitting into maternity clothing and proudly showing the world your growing belly while your baby alternates between periods of sleep and ecstatic dance around your womb. Perhaps you find yourself stepping off of the curb with more care, driving more cautiously, or covering your nose when a bus or a crowd of smokers pass. Throughout your day you experience the sublime truth that you are different, even special!

For many women this bliss of pregnancy can also bring with it emotional and physical transitions which can feel quite challenging. Your needs may seem to be at an all time high while aches and pains become more prevalent, sleepless nights the norm, and painful heartburn a common occurrence! You are trying to get your home and your life ready for your new baby, but your loved ones keep telling you to rest. Maybe you struggle with the concept of slowing down in spite of villainous back pain and radiating sciatica. Once you do stop moving and prop up your tired feet, you may find yourself thinking about how you will actually deliver your baby to the other side of your body. Perhaps you have a birth plan in mind or maybe the idea of exploring your options adds to your exhaustion and leaves you confused.

Regardless of where in your pregnancy you stand, know that out there exists a band of pregnant women who would gloriously join with you to create melodious harmonies of their similar thoughts and feelings.

With the increasing popularity of yoga, many women are aware of the numerous physical benefits of prenatal yoga. What is less often known is that in addition to its many physical benefits, prenatal yoga helps women glide gracefully through the evolutionary process of pregnancy by connecting with other pregnant women, allowing the opportunity for inward reflection, providing a healthy physical and emotional outlet for one's experiences, and ultimately preparing one for birth on a holistic level.

How Prenatal Yoga Can Help You During Pregnancy

Increases overall strength, flexibility & well-being — When you practice yoga, you are not only stretching your muscles, but you are stretching the tissues that encase your muscles, stimulating your organ systems, promoting the circulation of blood and oxygen, breathing more intentionally, and focusing your attention inward through imagery and meditation. The combined effect is intended to be one that promotes a heightened state of physical and emotional well-being.

Reduces low back pain & sciatica — As you are taught to become acutely aware of proper body alignment, you can carry yourself and your belly in an integrated manner. This can help to reduce the degree of pelvic tilt associated with pregnancy and significantly reduce the low back pain which it can cause. Additionally, there are specific yoga poses which stretch the muscles and tissues associated with the low back, hips, and hamstrings. Your yoga instructor should make these poses a part of each class.

Reduces aches & fatigue in the thoracic & cervical regions of the spine — During pregnancy, it can be difficult to find a space for yourself when trying to sleep at night. As a result, spinal alignment can become compromised during the night. This can leave congestion and muscle tension in the middle and upper regions of spine. There are yoga poses which create more fluidity in the spine by stretching the Para spinal muscles, as well as a poses which involve very gentle rotation of the upper torso. When these sequences are combined with directed yoga breathing, it can have the effect of relieving stress and creating more breathing room in these regions of the spine.

Reduces swelling & inflammation around your joints — A regular and consistent asana (yoga poses) practice improves and promotes the circulation of blood and oxygen throughout your body. This in turn, can reduce swelling and inflammation around ankles and wrists.

Aids in digestion — As baby grows, your intestinal organs get pushed around which may affect your regularity and cause indigestion. A regular practice of safe and gentle rotations and forward folds can help to promote regularity and aid in overall digestive flow.

Helps prepare you physically for giving birth — A regular practice of squatting asana helps to tone muscles of your pelvic floor and to help you gain strength to remain comfortable in a squatting position. This is an integral part of any yoga program as it helps to familiarize you with these very useful muscles. Even if you choose not to squat during labor, you will want to be able to use these muscles efficiently and effectively when nature calls upon you to push your baby into the world.

Improves your emotional well-being — Participating in a group prenatal class provides a community of support from people who understand what you are experiencing. It is a place to make new friends with whom you feel similarly situated. Some programs may even include discussions about pregnancy-related topics such as doulas, nursing, and birth plans. The combination of the physical or asana portion of yoga with the emotional and spiritual component can be an aid in reducing pregnancy-related anxiety and helping to experience the miracle and empowerment of pregnancy.

How Prenatal Yoga Can Help You During Labor

Regardless of whether you are looking forward to a drug assisted birth or planning for a natural delivery, regular participation in a prenatal yoga program while pregnant can reduce labor-associated anxiety by helping you tap into your own labor tools and teaching you how to bring them with you on your journey into motherhood.

Soothe & empower yourself by finding your own inner rhythm — You can learn to breathe in a way that is relaxing and natural, rather than contrived or awkward. When you consistently practice moving your body in a rhythmic fashion in unison with your breath, you carry with you a powerful relaxation and pain management tool.

Facilitate the labor process — Through yoga, you can learn how to identify when you are holding tension in your body. A body that is tense is not going to facilitate the birth process as easily as one that is relaxed. Moreover, when the body is tense, you may experience tension in thought and a withholding of breath. Sometimes our first cue about how we are responding to something is by examining what our body is doing. Once we can identify the tension, we can soften the body, relax our thoughts and release the breath, which can provide for an easier labor.

Improve your physical comfort — As you move through the various stages of labor, your body will want to move into different positions. If you are hoping for a natural birth, it can be helpful to have an idea of how you can position your body to help you during contractions and during times of relaxation. Many yoga poses can translate wonderfully into comfortable laboring positions.

Learn to use the tools of meditation & visual imagery — These are inspiring mechanisms through which you can soften and open physically, emotionally, and spiritually. When it comes time to ride through the most powerful of contractions, visual imagery combined with breath work can be one of the most useful labor tools.

Become familiar with the concept of vocalization — Labor is no time to be shy. It is the rare woman who births naturally and does not make a lot of noise in the process. In fact, I recall my husband telling me after the birth of our daughter that I had reached pitches and octaves he previously thought humanly impossible. In hindsight, I can tell you that the sounds that I made were a basic and primal part of the process and that they were made without my even thinking about it. If your yoga class includes chanting, you have an opportunity to become comfortable with the inherent power of vocalization. After all, “Om” is the birth sound!

Use the muscles of your pelvic floor effectively — The weeks of squatting were not done in vain! Squatting combined with a kegel like movement during pregnancy really can help your labor in two ways. The work that you have been doing during your pregnancy has toned the muscles of your pelvic floor and given you practice tightening and releasing them. If you receive an epidural you may lose sensation in your pelvic floor which can make pushing your baby out a bit of a guessing game. If you are used to working with these muscles, you will find it easier to use them even if you can not feel them. Alternatively, if you are opting for a natural birth, you will want these muscles to work quickly and effectively when it comes time to push.

What To Look For In A Prenatal Yoga Instructor

It is important to take the time to find a class and teacher that feels right for you. It is okay to ask for references of students who participated in the program which you are considering. Don't be shy about asking your potential yoga instructor about her training, the format she uses, or the intention of her class. Most of all, even if you are an avid yogi, pregnancy is not the time to push yourself by attending a regular yoga class and attempting to modify the postures to accommodate your growing belly. Not only does that increase the likelihood of causing injury, but you would be doing a disservice to yourself by missing out on a wonderful opportunity to participate in a class that is tailored for you at this very special time in your life.

Editorial written by Gail Silver, JD, Cyt, founder and director of Yoga Child, a Philadelphia based family yoga studio.

For information on Prenatal Yoga Classes in Prince Albert, call Cherish at 961-3287 or check her website www.soulfoodhealing.com.