

HOW PREGNANCY YOGA

Can

IMPROVE BONDING *with* BABY

Author: Laura Bissell (BWY Course Tutor and Mindbody Wellness Tutor)



Eleven years ago, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) drew attention to how perinatal mental health problems can disturb the early bond between mother and baby, with possible long-term effects on infant development. Standard treatments for postnatal depression did little to nurture that sensitive relationship, prompting NICE to call for more research into approaches that focus directly on the mother-baby connection.

Since then, pregnancy yoga has steadily grown in popularity as a safe, supportive way for expectant mothers to stay active, manage stress and prepare for birth. For many women who have always loved high-intensity exercise, a GP or midwife's suggestion to "try a pregnancy yoga class" marks their first experience of yoga. Often this is the first time they are encouraged to slow down, tune into their bodies and consciously connect with their baby in utero, which is the beginning of the important mother-baby bond.



Why Pregnancy Feels Different

Pregnancy is a powerful threshold. Physically, hormonally and emotionally, life is changing from week to week. Even women who never warmed to the language of 'mind-body-spirit' often find that, during pregnancy, this connection becomes impossible to ignore. Mood affects sleep, tension affects digestion, fluctuating emotions stress the body, and small shifts in posture or breath have a big impact on how they feel.



At the same time, there is a natural opening towards something larger – a sense of connection to the earth, to cycles of nature and to a wider web of life. Yoga offers a way to honour all of this, giving practical tools for comfort and strength while also offering space for reflection, trust and inner listening.

To make this easier to navigate, it helps to think about pregnancy in three broad stages – the trimesters – and how yoga can support each one.

First Trimester: Soothing and Settling

The first trimester (roughly weeks 1–12) can be a rollercoaster: nausea, fatigue, hormonal shifts and, for many, a mix of excitement and anxiety. Energy is often low, so pregnancy yoga at this stage is about *gentle* support rather than big dynamic flows. Simple movements, restorative poses and short practices are key.

Gentle breathing practices (*pranayama*) can calm the nervous system and help with anxiety or discomfort. Throughout pregnancy, it is important to avoid *kumbhaka* (breath retention) and any heating *pranayama*, such as *kapalabhati* (skull-shining breath) and *suryabhedha* (sun breath). In the first trimester, it is wise to start with basic breath awareness. Pre-*pranayama* techniques can be introduced, such as:

- *Nadi Shodhana* (alternate nostril breathing) purifies the *nadis* (energy channels) and remains a classic for steadying the nervous system – ideal for evenings before bedtime.
- *Straw breathing* (in through the nose and out through softly pursed lips, as if around a straw) is a simple way to gently lengthen the exhale and support the parasympathetic nervous system.

Small, steady movements can help release tension more effectively than deep stretches or strong holds. Exploring gentle breath-and-movement in the first trimester can start very simply. Sitting in *sukhasana* (easy pose) and lifting the arms on the inhalation, then lowering them on the exhalation, or moving with *marjaryasana-bitilasana* (cat-cow) in time with the breath, helps lay the foundations of coordinated, mindful practice early in pregnancy.

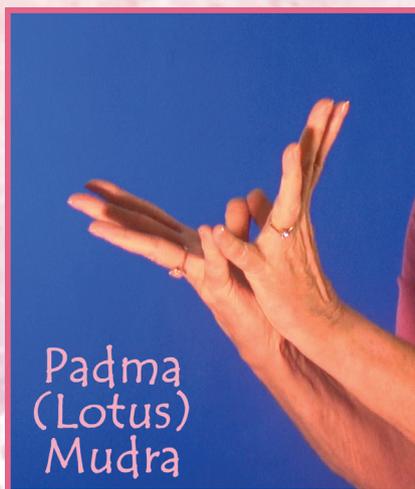
It is also essential to emphasise *tadasana* (mountain pose) for optimal posture, so that pelvic stability and healthy spinal alignment are supported as the body adapts to the profound physical changes of pregnancy.

Mudras – simple hand gestures used in yoga to cultivate specific qualities – can be particularly valuable in early pregnancy. *Padma* (Lotus) *Mudra* is particularly lovely. Start with palms together at the chest, keeping the heels of the palms, the pinkies, and the thumbs together while extending the middle three fingers away from each other, forming the shape of a lotus flower. This *mudra* symbolises purity, opens the heart space and helps to rise above challenges.

In early pregnancy, women can lie on their backs comfortably, either with the hips supported, or with the legs elevated up the wall – positions that become less accessible as pregnancy progresses.

Second Trimester: Strength and Confidence

The second trimester (around weeks 13–27) is often called the ‘golden’ period. Energy usually returns, nausea often eases, and the bump becomes more visible.



Many women feel ready to move more fully again – and this is where pregnancy yoga can feel empowering. Asana becomes a way to build strength, stamina and confidence for birth. Standing, grounding postures can enhance concentration and strength. Practices such as *Virabhadrasana I* (Warrior 1), combined with *Ujjayi Pranayama* (Victorious Breath), can feel particularly empowering at a time when women may be feeling overwhelmed by well-meaning advice from relatives or by the one-size-fits-all hospital procedures they are researching. A slightly narrower Warrior I stance often feels more grounding in pregnancy, with the front leg bent and the back foot stepped behind on a slight angle. Move with the breath: inhaling to bend the front knee and lift the arms overhead, exhaling to straighten the leg and lower the arms, or keeping the hands on the hips and focusing on gentle repetitions if there is high blood pressure or heartburn.



Whether held dynamically or in stillness, the key for the pregnant warrior is use of *drishti* and *ujjayi* – a steady gaze on a fixed point and the soft “ocean” sound of the breath – which help to connect with inner strength and the sense of prana flowing within.

Third Trimester: Preparing Body and Mind for Birth

The third trimester (weeks 28–40+) is about preparing body and mind for birth, with yoga supporting comfort, stamina, breath and a steady mindset as the body feels heavier and sleep becomes more disrupted.

On the mat, gentle all-fours work such as *marjariasana* and flowing hip circles, figure-8s and wall-based variations of downward dog can ease backache, create more space for the baby and encourage Optimal Foetal Position (OFP), ideally head-down, back towards the mother’s front. Upright, forward-leaning and side-lying positions all help create more space in the pelvis for baby to wiggle into a good spot. Slow, spacious movements help pregnant students stay connected to their breath and pelvic awareness as labour approaches.

Simple group practices like shared back massage in a circle or a supported group tree pose build confidence, friendship and a sense of “we’re in this together”, which can significantly reduce anxiety in late pregnancy. Many women carry these connections into early motherhood, extending the support network beyond the class itself.

Cooling pranayama such as *Sheetali* (inhaling through a curled tongue) and *Sheetkari* (inhaling through closed teeth) can feel blissfully soothing in warm rooms or summer pregnancies, while Golden Thread exhalation (in through the nose, out through softly parted lips toward a single point of focus) becomes a practical coping tool for managing sensations and staying present during labour.



facebook.com/official.yogamag



Godḍess Flow with Paḍma Mudra repeat 6-9 times



Inhale through nose
'I gather energy from above'

Slowly exhale through pursed lips
'I send energy to my baby'

Godḍess Flow with Paḍma Mudra

A flowing, wide-leg squat sequence (often called 'Godḍess') combined with Paḍma Mudra at the heart can be deeply supportive.

- How: Stand with feet wide, toes turned slightly out. Bend the knees towards the toes (not beyond), pelvis neutral. On an inhale, straighten the legs and sweep the arms up; on the exhale, bend the knees and bring hands into Paḍma Mudra at the heart. Move with the breath.
- Benefits: Builds leg strength and stamina, opens the hips and chest, and links movement with breath and intention. Particularly beneficial for women seeking a more active birth, as it uses gravity to assist the baby's descent.
- Caution: Avoid wide-leg positions and deep squats if you have pelvic girdle pain or a low-lying placenta. Instead, keep the feet and knees hip-width apart and explore small knee bends with a gentle hinge from the hips, or use sit-to-stand repetitions from a chair as a safer strengthening option.

Visualisation

Focused, lengthened exhalation such as the golden thread exhalation while gazing at a photograph of a lotus flower – or visualising its petals gently opening – can be a valuable technique during labour, especially in those moments when the midwife asks the birthing mother to breathe through a contraction and resist the urge to push.

Using a Birth Ball

A fitness/birth ball is a wonderful ally in late pregnancy and labour.

- Sitting on the ball encourages an upright pelvis and natural spinal alignment.
- Gentle hip circles, rocking and figure-of-eight movements can help ease backache and may encourage baby into an optimal position.
- Leaning forward over the ball (perhaps on a bed or sofa) offers a supported all-fours variation that many women find comforting in contractions.

Chanting seed sounds or simply vocalising the sound 'ah' while leaning on the ball, can offer significant support for pain management during labour and birth.



Relaxation

Finding comfortable rest positions is essential in late pregnancy. Lying on the left side with cushions supporting the head, abdomen and the bent top knee can be deeply soothing, and this side-lying position often becomes invaluable both before and after birth.

Conclusion

Ultimately, pregnancy yoga offers far more than physical conditioning. It is about offering women space to breathe, feel, question and trust themselves at one of life's most profound thresholds. Through breath awareness, mindful movement and conscious relaxation, expectant mothers are gently guided back to their innate wisdom – supporting not only the journey towards birth but also the transition into motherhood itself. In this way, yoga becomes less about preparing the body alone, and more about honouring pregnancy as a sacred, embodied rite of passage.



Laura Bissell is a co-founder of Mindbody Wellness Training and has been a British Wheel of Yoga Diploma Course Tutor since 2008, drawing on her deep knowledge of anatomy, asana, pranayama, philosophy and relaxation. She has been supporting women through prenatal and postnatal physical and emotional shifts for over two decades and she delivers specialist training to teachers so that they can offer safe, inclusive, evidence-aware classes in yoga for pregnancy and postnatal yoga for mums and babies.

Learn more

Laura is tutoring *Yoga for Pregnancy* and *Postnatal Yoga for Mums & Babies* through BWY Recognised Centre Mindbody Wellness, open to qualified yoga teachers from any tradition. These blended courses combine self-paced e-learning at home with live, practical Zoom sessions, starting on 21 February and 16 May. On enrolment, trainees can join the BWY as Associate Teacher Members, gaining access to the wider teaching community. On successful completion of their assessed class teaching, candidates achieve the Ofqual-regulated BWYQ Level 3 Qualifications in Teaching Antenatal Yoga and/or Postnatal Yoga for Mums and Babies – a nationally recognised specialist award that offers professional recognition.

Visit <https://mindbodywellness.org.uk/antenatal-postnatal-2/> to view introductory recordings and to download course summaries/costs. **Apply online via: <https://mindbodywellness.org.uk/forms-application>.**

British Wheel of Yoga Training (BWYT) is also offering a hybrid Pregnancy Yoga short course from 21 February, with five in-person sessions in London and online sessions via Zoom. Hosted by Michele Misgalla and Judy Cameron – experienced midwives, doulas and long-time pregnancy yoga teachers – this course offers grounded, expert guidance for supporting women through pregnancy, birth and beyond. To register your interest: <https://portal.bwy.org.uk/user/trainings/503>.

