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Pregnancy

Yoga for Your Pregnancy

Five poses to invigorate your body, mind and spirit

By Brandie Weikle

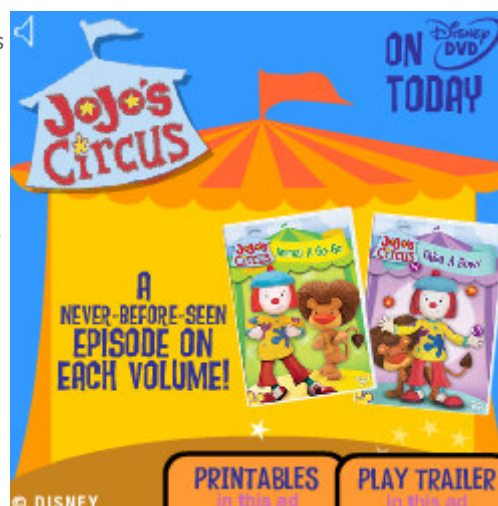
Ten round-bellied women shuffle into the old council chambers at the local town hall. In oversized T-shirts and stretchy pants, we sit in a circle on purple mats. The prenatal yoga instructor turns on her portable stereo, and the sounds of the ocean and quiet percussion drift around the room. I watch the days spent at jobs and tending to busy families melt from my classmates' faces, and I feel my hectic subway ride slipping from my schedules. Our weekly chit-chat ensues as the instructor encourages us to remind each other of how far along we are, how many kids we have, if any, and whether we're having a boy or girl, if we know.

But soon the focus turns inward as our teacher guides us through our warm-ups. Eyes closed and sitting cross-legged, we take big, steady breaths, slowly warming up our spines with gentle rounding and stretching. Then, hands on our knees, we start making small circles with our upper bodies, slowly lubricating our widening hips. The instructor leads through our now-familiar series of yoga poses, all selected for their pregnancy-specific benefits – one opens the pelvis, the next strengthens the perineum, another helps the upper back support the weight of the breasts. Everyone's favourite part, it seems, comes at the end when we get to lie on our left sides and take a few minutes to connect with our babies. The instructor encourages us to focus on one positive statement about the birth. For me, this is often the only time dedicated solely to visualizing a positive birth experience. "The birth will be routine and manageable," I repeat to myself. With droopy eyes and relaxed smiles, we reluctantly get up from our mats and say goodbye for another week.

in this article:

5 Yoga poses you can do:

- The Wall Stretch
- Cat Cow
- Warrior Mama
- Superman Stretch
- Birthing Squat
- Plus: Thinking of joining a class?



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My classmates and I are among

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the thousands of Canadian women who are flocking to prenatal yoga. Diana Gerske, expecting her second, has been here before, when she was pregnant with Megan, now two. "I find even more of a benefit this time because now I have a toddler running around," says the Toronto mom. "This is the only time in the week that I have time for me, to focus on myself and on this baby."

While it's the chance to meditate and relax that makes prenatal yoga unique among pregnancy fitness classes, there are many physical benefits as well. "I didn't have the normal back pain that a lot of women experience and I attribute that to the strengthening we did in class," says Gerske of her first pregnancy. "I didn't have leg cramps and a lot of the typical discomforts." And although her labour was certainly painful, her recovery was quick. "I was taking fitness classes again after four weeks."

Andrea Page, founder of Fitmom Canada in Toronto, says the advantages of doing yoga during pregnancy are endless. "There is research to show that women who do yoga during pregnancy may have an easier labour and delivery," says Page. "Through yoga we learn breathing and meditation techniques. Those are extremely useful in the labour room."

Prenatal yoga helps ward off many of the discomforts of pregnancy by counteracting the effects of pregnancy posture, characterized by a swayed lower back, rounded upper back, tight hamstrings and lax abdominal muscles. It does this by helping women maintain strength in key muscle groups, such as the lower back, explains Page, a doula, childbirth educator and mother of two. As with any form of exercise during pregnancy, you should seek approval from your doctor or midwife and keep in mind a few restrictions:

- Don't lie flat on your back past your first trimester. The weight of the baby on your uterus compresses a major vein and can affect the amount of oxygen traveling back to your heart and to the baby.
- Avoid inverted poses you may have done in regular yoga classes, such as headstands and shoulder stands.
- Remember to move slowly when you're coming out of a pose. Because of your growing belly, your centre of gravity changes a little each day. Listen to your body and modify as needed – try putting a knee down on the floor or moving in stages. Don't worry about looking graceful.
- Do the talk test. You should always be able to carry on a conversation when you exercise so you know you're not working at a level that's too much for you and the baby.
- Be aware of "Gumby syndrome." The extra dose of the hormone relaxin in your system may give you a false sense of flexibility, leaving you vulnerable to injury. Be careful not to exceed your normal range of motion.
- Pay close attention to warning signs such as lightheadedness, spotting or fluid leakage, and report any unusual symptoms to your caregiver immediately. Exercise won't cause these to happen, but if you have certain pregnancy-related conditions, you may need to avoid exerting yourself.
- Hold each posture for three breaths. Listen to your body and build up to the recommended number of reps as gradually as you need to. If you need to cut back, do fewer reps instead of shortening the time you spend on each.

If you want some of the benefits of prenatal yoga but can't get to a class – or if you'd like a sneak preview before signing up – here are a few poses you can try at home:

The Wall Stretch

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How to do it:

Stand about one metre from a wall with your feet hip-width apart. Lower your upper body so it makes a 90-degree angle with the wall and your legs, your hands on the wall at hip height and your arms fully outstretched (1). Depending on your height, you may have to adjust your feet so your body can make an L shape. Your head should be in a neutral position facing down so your spine is straight and your back is flat.



Inhale and look toward the wall. Exhale, then keeping your back flat, tilt your pelvis forward and hug your baby with your abdominal muscles (2). Lower your chin toward your chest.

Repeat 15 to 20 times.

What it does:

Stretches hamstrings made tight by the effect of the baby's weight on your posture. Strengthens abdominal muscles needed for pushing.

Cat Cow

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How to do it:

Begin on your hands and knees in a tabletop position. Your back should be flat with your hands directly below your shoulders and your knees below your hips.

Starting with your gaze in between your hands, inhale and look up (1). Lift your tailbone up ever so slightly, but don't sway your lower back.

Exhale and contract your back into a big C curve toward the ceiling like a cat (2). Hug your baby tight with your abdominal muscles by imagining that you're pulling your belly button toward your spine. Put your chin toward your chest.

Repeat 15 to 20 times.

What it does:

Helps you train for birth by tilting and opening the pelvis, strengthens abs and stretches out the upper back. Women whose babies are in the posterior position (face toward mom's belly button) are often encouraged to use this position to help turn the baby. It may also be helpful during labour to relieve back pain.



Warrior Mama

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How to do it:

Stand with your legs at least a metre apart, toes pointed outwards. Bend your knees about 45 degrees. With bent elbows, open your arms wide, hands about the height of your ears, elbows in line with your knees, shoulders lowered (1).

Inhale and contract your upper back muscles and squeeze your shoulder blades together. Exhale and lower your hands to the inside of your knees, making a big C curve with your back, pulling your chin to your chest and hugging your baby with your abs (2).

Repeat four to eight times.

What it does:

Supports the weight of your breasts by strengthening the middle and upper back. Stretches your chest and upper-back muscles and tightens abdominals.

Superman Stretch

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How to do it:

Kneel on the floor in tabletop posture, knees below the hips, hands below the shoulders and gaze between your hands. Pull your belly button toward your spine (1).

Inhale and extend your right arm and left leg so that your outreached limbs and back form a parallel line to the floor (2). Flex your foot and don't sway your lower back. Exhale and return to original position. Inhale and repeat with left arm and right leg.

Modify by dropping extended foot to the floor instead of holding it in a line with the back.

Repeat 15 to 20 times.

What it does:

Strengthens the lower back to support your growing belly. Strengthens the glutes (buttock muscles) and hamstrings.

Birthing Squat

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How to do it:

Stand with your feet at least as wide apart as your hips (1). You may have to go wider to be comfortable.

With your toes pointing slightly sideways, lower into a squat, keeping your heels on the floor (2). If you have varicose veins, or if you find the stretch too intense, don't lower all the way; sit on a block or something elevated like a bottom stair. Put your elbows in front of your knees and your palms together in a prayer position. Breathe. Hold for 30 to 60 seconds.

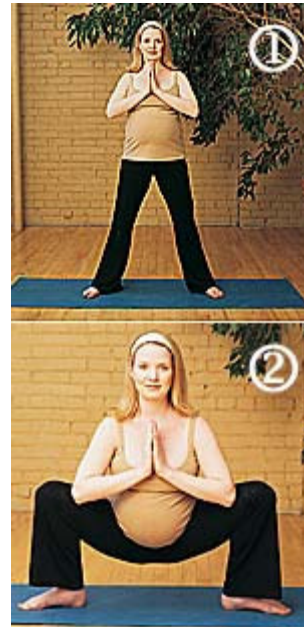
Try doing Kegel exercises in this posture to strengthen your pelvic floor. Squeeze as though you're trying to stop peeing midstream. Release.

Put your hands on the floor, adjust your feet so they are parallel and slowly straighten your legs. Roll up one vertebra at a time.

Rest and repeat three to five times.

What it does:

Trains you to deliver your baby in this position by strengthening your legs and building flexibility in your hips. Opens your pelvic outlet an additional 20 percent, which could be enough to allow the baby's head to crown without medical intervention. Kegel exercises help prevent urinary incontinence.



Thinking of Joining a Class?

There are a lot of different certifying bodies out there, and you should expect your instructor to have pre/postnatal certification through one of them. "But the important thing is to make sure your instructor is familiar with current guidelines for exercise in pregnancy. The Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada has new recommendations available at sogc.org (click on Clinical Practice Guidelines).

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