

A Journey Through Motherhood Prenatal Yoga

Carlene Haavig

Prenatal Yoga

I had just begun my Yoga Teacher Certification Training at Prairie Yoga and was excited for a new chapter in my life to learn more about myself and to further deepen my yoga practice. At the time, I had a two-year-old son at home and had recently quit my full time job to be at home with him more often. While I loved being able to stay at home with my son, and I was extremely grateful to not have to take the train into the city every day, sit in an office and miss out on so many precious moments of childhood, I also felt isolated and like I was losing part of who I was and my identity as a woman, not just a mom. I had been doing yoga for a little over six years at the time and over the years my practice had become a passion, lifestyle and solitude for me. I remember sitting in a CPR class that I had to take for my job and talking to a lady who was in my class who had to get certified for her Yoga Teacher Certification requirements. All of the sudden, it hit me. This is what I should be doing with my life. For the first time in a long time I was confident in my future, not just as a mom but also as an individual. I felt a deep sense of the possibility of balance, which previously seemed so unachievable for me as a mom. Working full time was terrible; staying at home wasn't that great for me either. I was currently working part-time at a job I neither loved nor hated. All of the sudden, I was enrolled in the training program and felt like for the first time in a while I was doing something for just me again. Something that was going to improve me as a person and give me the flexible career that I had been dreaming about since I quit my full time job. And the best part, it was something that I loved doing more than anything. I was about a month into the program and fully enjoying an entire day a week of "selfish" me-time away from my 2 year old learning about yoga and spending time with other adults. I was extremely ready to take the rest of the year for myself. To be "selfish," for the benefit of my family, of course, and put some extra household work on my husband as I took my own personal journey of self-discovery, enlightenment and independence.

It felt amazing. Then, to my surprise, a month into my training I found out that I was pregnant. My dream of selfish me-time and independence suddenly had a different look to it. I had just begun the journey of expanding my mind and teaching my body to do rigorous yoga postures in an advanced environment when all of the sudden, motherhood changed my path and my plans once again. Of course I was filled with joy over my pregnancy. I truly wanted another child very much and was planning to try to have another one, once my Yoga Teacher Certification was complete. I thought about postponing my teacher training until a later point in my life when I was not so physically restricted. But then I realized that I would always have a reason to postpone the training, especially with two young children, and that it may be years before I found myself presented with the time and the opportunity to complete a 9-month yoga training program again. I decided to stick to the training and continue my path of learning so that I could have the career that I wanted once my second baby was born. I am so glad that I did. If I had known how hard it was going to be, I might have quit then and there,

however, I have learned more than I ever thought possible and grown in ways that I never before imagined. As both a mom and an individual. So there I was, 9 months ahead of me of pregnancy, 8 months ahead of me of yoga teacher training, ready to take on a great challenge and what turned out to be one of the greatest journeys of my life.

Over the past year, prenatal yoga has taken on an entirely different meaning for me than ever before. I have lived it, learned it and used it to help me grow as a woman and as mom and take care of my baby and myself. It has become a sacred and deeply meaningful topic for me and I feel blessed beyond belief to have had to experience of going through my teacher training while pregnant. While it was not always fun or easy, it was rewarding beyond belief and teaching yoga to moms-to-be has become a topic of great passion and importance to me. Over the past year, I have learned to be in tune with my body and my baby in ways that I never imagined, be a more present and patient mother to my 2-year old son, and let go of my ego of what yoga asanas should be and accept the sacred place that I am in my life right now.

This thesis is based mostly on my own personal experiences as I journey through the wonders of pregnancy and the benefits of yoga. I have also had many inspiring and helpful teachers and read many useful books along the way to help me with my journey. Much of the information in this theses is referenced from various sources (including my own personal experience, insights, and opinions) but also, Lori Gaspar and Rebecca Stiles, my amazing yoga teachers throughout my training experience at Prairie Yoga; Dee Davis, certified and long time prenatal yoga teacher, who I had the pleasure of meeting during a prenatal yoga workshop at Prairie Yoga; Kathleen Wright, a fabulous and experienced Iyengar teacher who taught me many wonderful prenatal yoga modifications during a 2 day workshop I took at Prairie Yoga; and 2 of the best pregnancy books I have ever read: “Yoga Mama Yoga Baby” by Margo Shapiro Bachman and “Iyengar Yoga for Motherhood” by Geeta S. Iyengar.

1: Yoga and Health: The Many Benefits of Yoga During Pregnancy

Practicing yoga while pregnant is definitely not a new ritual or a passing fad. In fact, it has been regarded in India as a healthy and beneficial practice for woman during pregnancy for a very long time. T. Krishnamacharya was a huge advocate of practicing traditional Yogic and Ayurvedic practices while pregnant and taught many of his students the various health benefits of having a yoga practice while pregnant (Health, Healing and Beyond, T.K.V Desikachar.) Yoga helps to strengthen, refine and stabilize your body, breath and mind (Margo Bachman) and there are countless benefits of practicing yoga while you are pregnant. Prenatal yoga helps good digestion, healthy blood circulation and light easy breathing. Asanas and pranayama help to end tiredness and nervous tension, and to rid the body of toxins. Yoga not only can benefit a healthy and more comfortable pregnancy, but if recommended postures are practiced regularly, it

can help prepare for an easy and natural childbirth. Poses that encourage opening of the hips and pelvis can facilitate comfort throughout the pregnancy and possibly an easier labor. Empirical tests have proven that not only the physical health of an expectant mother but also her emotional and mental state affects the future health and development of the unborn child. Yoga, pranayama, meditation and a healthy lifestyle can highly enhance the child's future health, as well as the mother's. (Iyengar Yoga for Motherhood, Geeta Iyengar).

Some of the many benefits of prenatal yoga are:

- Improves well being
- Improves physical control and balance
- Improves blood circulation
- Relaxes the body
- Strengthens muscles
- Improves flexibility
- Opens and tones the pelvic floor
- Helps with delivery
- Helps with nausea, especially during the first trimester
- Helps with depression, which can be common during pregnancy
- Strengthens pelvic floor, which helps with labor and delivery
- Helps pelvic floor get back in shape faster after delivery
- May shorten 2nd stage of labor

Dee Davis Prenatal workshop

Possible Discomforts During Pregnancy that Yoga Helps to Alleviate

- Morning sickness
- Weakness and fatigue
- Shortness of breath
- Heartburn
- Swollen legs and feet
- Varicose veins
- Back pain
- High blood pressure
- Toxemia
- Headache
- Dizziness
- Numbness
- Urinary problems

Geeta Iyengar

Throughout my pregnancy, yoga helped me to keep up my energy level, focus on a healthy lifestyle and increase circulation in my body. When I practiced in the

morning, it would help me recharge and get ready for the day. It gave me energy and made my body feel lighter. It helped a lot with my circulation and helped me focus on staying healthy and active throughout my pregnancy. When I practiced in the evening, it helped me to relax and sleep better. It was a huge relief for back pain, sore muscles, and headaches. While my practice changed during my pregnancy, I still worked to maintain a regular practice. Sometimes I found it challenging to practice my usual hour and a half studio class and on days when I lacked the energy, I opted for shorter practices at home. Sometimes I did multiple shorter practices a day. I did not push myself and allowed my practices to adapt to my daily needs. I found that practicing for 15 minutes in the morning and 30 minutes in the afternoon or evening really helped me to relax, stay energized and keep my body feeling toned and strong. Just the basic act of stretching while pregnant was a huge relief to circulation issues and helped to reduce swelling in my legs and feet. It also improved my mood and kept me feeling healthy while I was pregnant.

Each trimester is different and brings about different hormones and energy levels during pregnancy. It is different for every woman, but I found that the first trimester was often the hardest time to practice yoga because I felt sick, nauseous and exhausted all of the time. Some days all I could honestly manage was to breathe and eat chocolate. However, during the first trimester, practicing a light restorative yoga really did help with my morning sickness and also helped to alleviate the terrible hormonal headaches I was suffering throughout my first trimester. On the days that it was a challenge for me to keep up with my regular practice, I opted for a few restorative postures such as Viparita Karani, Supta Baddha Konasana, and a supported Prasarita Padottanasana with blocks. Then I would work on a relaxing pranayama practice for 5 or 10 minutes such as a simple belly breathing practice. Some days this was all I managed but it really helped. During my first pregnancy, it was easy to rest when I needed to rest, however, the second time around with a 2-year old running around was a little more complicated when it came to taking care of myself. I found that when I practiced restorative yoga it would bring me back to the present moment, help to clear my mind and settle my hormones and emotions, and it really helped with my energy, fatigue and nausea. I took it very easy on my body during my first trimester because it is the most delicate point in the pregnancy for the fetus and I wanted to be as cautious as possible. I focused heavily on restorative yoga and light gentle breathing.

As I approached the relief of my second trimester, I really enjoyed and got into my yoga practice once again. I had my energy back and I was not as limited in the postures that I could practice. The first trimester is actually the most limiting, I found, because the body is at its highest risk of miscarriage and it is extremely important to be very cautious when practicing yoga, or any other physical exercise. Once the second trimester starts, there is a lot more that the body can handle and I felt physically and mentally more capable to practice as my fatigue, morning sickness and hormonal headaches subsided. Yoga helped me to stay

strong and flexible while in my second trimester and helped me to focus on a lifestyle where I was nurturing my baby and myself. When I got into my third trimester, practicing yoga helped me with the fatigue that was once again creeping in and was a great relief in circulation issues as well as back pain. As I neared the end of my pregnancy, my practices got shorter and I stopped going to my usual hour and a half classes entirely and focused on my at home practice and doing postures that my body needed the most in doable increments of 15-30 minutes. I would try to practice once in the morning, even if for only 10 minutes, and once in the afternoon once my son was down for a nap. I found that as I neared the end of my third trimester, pushing myself in long classes was not best for my body but maintaining a regular practice still felt amazing and had so many benefits, especially for better sleep, circulation and back pain. Learning to modify your practice to your daily needs is so important, especially while pregnant, and allows for the greatest benefits and enjoyment out of your personal practice.

I also noticed that a healthy yoga practice helped me through an easy and natural labor and helped my body recover and bounce back to normal after my first pregnancy, even after having a 9-pound baby. Practicing yoga was not only extremely beneficial on my body and health, but it kept me relaxed and helped me to stay clear, focused and happy during my pregnancy. It helped me live in the moment, appreciate the stage I was at in life, and be thankful for my many blessings during my pregnancy. I never felt more connected to my body and it helped me feel connected to my baby as well.

2. Pregnancy and Yoga: General Rules and Restrictions for Prenatal Yoga

Prenatal yoga can be a wonderful source of exercise during pregnancy and an excellent way to focus on your health and help to alleviate many ailments and discomforts that naturally arise in the body while pregnant. However, your body is in a very delicate and precious state during your pregnancy and it is not a time to push or challenge your physical capabilities. Gentle, traditional yoga can provide many benefits while pregnant, but it is also very important to know and understand the general rules and restrictions of practicing yoga while pregnant. And it is important to always practice under a knowledgeable teacher and only after the approval of your doctor. I can not stress how important it is to modify your practice to your daily mental and physical needs while pregnant. If you go into your pregnancy expecting to maintain your usual practice, you will not receive as many of the possible benefits and you may leave yourself feeling mentally and physically drained.

General Rules During Prenatal Yoga Practice

- If you are in your first trimester, or if you have a high-risk pregnancy or history of miscarriage, consult your doctor before practicing yoga or any other physical exercise. For high-risk pregnancies and woman with high risk of miscarriage, practicing yoga is not recommended during the first

- trimester. After the first trimester, with consultation of your doctor, restorative and supported postures can be practiced.
- If you have never practiced yoga before pregnancy, you should only practice prenatal yoga with a knowledgeable teacher.
 - If you had a strong yoga practice previous to your pregnancy, you can continue most of your previous practice with modifications after your first trimester (there are a few posture restrictions that should be avoided entirely, see below section on “Restrictions”).
 - During the first trimester, all prenatal yogis should do a gentle practice or none at all as the fetus is still implanting and the risk of miscarriage is highest.
 - Avoid breath retention in pranayama, it limits baby’s oxygen supply and can leave mom feeling dizzy, light-headed and agitated.
 - Since oxygen supply is decreased during exercise, modify intensity, drink a lot of water, and stop your practice when fatigued.
 - Avoid laying on the back after the first trimester to avoid pressure on the vena cava (the spine behind the uterus).
 - Stop is there is unexplained discomfort, pain, leakage, bleeding, cramping, difficulty in breathing, pain in chest, increased swelling, or headaches.
 - Avoid jumping and jolting exercises.
 - Drink extra water, as dehydration is more common while pregnant.
 - Avoid inversions during pregnancy. ****
 - Focus on maintaining good posture in yoga asanas throughout pregnancy. As the uterus enlarges, changes in posture can occur. A poorly aligned spine can put increased strain on the muscles and pelvis and lead to neck and back pain, poor breathing from congestion of the lungs, swollen ankles, and sore knees. Good posture begins at the feet; head and neck should be erect, pelvis and shoulders aligned, chest open and legs strong and balanced.
 - During pregnancy, a hormone called “relaxin” is released into the body. It is meant to soften ligaments, especially in the pelvis girdle. It is important not to take joints past their normal range of motion, even though the relaxin may allow it. It can cause pain and tears in the ligaments. All ligaments soften, especially the feet so it best to use caution in activities that are hard on the feet. Make sure to elevate the feet after a long day and stay off of them and rest when possible. Relaxin can also cause weakness in the joints so it is best to avoid postures that put too much pressure on weak joints and ligaments, especially the wrists.

**Practicing inversions during pregnancy is a very controversial topic and opinions vary based on different styles of yoga and various teachers. Prairie Yoga and Prenatal Yoga Teacher Dee Davis recommends not practicing any type of inversion during pregnancy, with the exception of Adho-Mukha-Svanasana (downward facing dog). On the other hand, in the Iyengar school of yoga, teachers such as Geeta Iyengar and Kathleen Wright believe that gentle inversions with proper props, modifications, and*

*teaching instruction can be very beneficial and soothing to the baby. I would definitely not teach or recommend practicing inversions in a prenatal yoga class, and would definitely not recommend practicing inversions to new or inexperienced students. If the student is experienced in yoga, has a strong inversion practice prior to pregnancy, is working under a knowledgeable teacher and is using the proper modifications and props, restorative inversions can feel very good for relaxation and creating space in the abdomen. I practiced headstand against the wall and in a studio with a teacher I trusted throughout my first and second trimester. I stopped by the end of the second trimester because my balance felt off and it was challenging to get into the posture. At this point, I did a modified headstand against the wall using blocks and keeping my feet on the ground (*see photo session of modifications). I also learned a brilliant way to practice shoulder stand in a Kathleen Wright workshop that I took at Prairie Yoga where the student is against a wall with a set up of 5 blankets and bent legs with both feet resting on the wall for support. I think knowing your body, trusting your teachers and your practice, and knowing the risks and benefits are key.*

Postures to avoid during pregnancy

- Deep lumbar twists, as they serve to cleanse and flush the system. This is especially crucial during the first trimester when the fetus is at its most fragile state. Avoid practicing postures such as Parivritta Trikonasana, Ardha Matsyendrasana and Marichyasana throughout the entirety of pregnancy. Instead, it is safe to practice gentle open twists, such as Bharadvajasana.
- Stomach compression, such as Navasana, Ardha Navasana and Plank.
- Deep forward bends, such as Pachimottanasana. Some forward bends, such as Uttanasana, can be modified by spreading the legs a further distance apart to make room for the belly and by using blocks to make the bend less intense. Upavista Konasana and Janu Sirsasana can be modified by using a strap and not folding forward deeply. Prasaritta Paddotanasana is a wonderful posture to practice with blocks to get many of the restorative benefits of a forward fold safely during pregnancy.
- Deep backbends, such as Urdha Dhanurasana. Instead, practice a supported Setu Bandha Sarvangasana with a block under the sacrum.
- Avoid or use caution when practicing balance postures to avoid the risk of falling. Instead, use a wall or a chair for extra support.
- Poses that put pressure on the baby and the stomach such as Dhanurasana, Salabhasana and Bhujangasana. There are absolutely no modification for these postures and should be completely avoided during the entirety of the pregnancy.
- Anything that raises body temperature or creates unsteady breath (vigorous and heated power yoga classes should be avoided, use

modifications when doing sun salutations or avoid if they feel too rigorous.)

- After 12 weeks, avoid postures that require lying flat on your back without support. Instead, recline supported at a 45% angle. Intense Pranayama practices. Instead practice simple and gentle breathing practices that help to calm the mind and cool the body.
- *See “See Props and Modifications” in Section 3 for more information on modified postures.

After the first trimester, there are many postures that can still be practiced as normal or with modifications. It is beneficial to practice postures that create space between the ribcage and abdomen, as this will make more room for the baby and may improve comfort throughout the pregnancy. Gentle twists can aid in relieving back pain, which is a common discomfort during pregnancy. Standing postures help to develop strength and stamina and many can help to build strength in the pelvic floor, open tight hips and hamstrings, and help to relieve morning sickness. Squatting postures, such as low-lunge, lizard and malasana can help to strengthen the pelvic floor and prepare for labor and delivery.

(Dee Davis, Prairie Yoga, Margo Bachman, Geeta Iyengar, Kathleen Wright, and CDH Medical Advisors.)

3. A Safe Practice: Props and Modifications During Pregnancy

While there are a variety of yoga postures that cannot be practiced during pregnancy, including deep twists and postures that put compression on the belly, many yoga postures can be practiced safely and comfortably using various props and modifications. I was pleasantly surprised during my pregnancy how much I could do even while pregnant. This not only allowed me to continue my practice throughout pregnancy, but it helped me to feel strong, powerful and in control of my body. This is such an empowering feeling when you can no longer control your hormones, emotions, or fit into your regular pants. Having a strong yoga practice in my life during my pregnancy kept me grounded and truly kept me sane. I absolutely love teaching students about ways that they can stay healthy and safe but also continue a strong and regular yoga practice throughout pregnancy.

Necessary and Recommended Props for a Prenatal Yoga Practice

- 2-3 Blocks
- Bolster
- 2-3 Blankets
- Yoga Strap or Belt
- Chair
- A wall to practice against for balance

Prenatal Modifications

Generally, pregnant woman should practice all poses with the legs at hip-width distance or wider. Always make sure there is enough room in the stance for baby, and take a wider stance in balance postures if necessary to ensure stability and prevent falling. Using a wall, chair, or extra blocks are always wonderful tools to remain stable and balanced. Always remember that every body and every pregnancy is different. If any posture or modification does not feel good, do not practice it. Always use a blanket for extra support under the knees when doing postures that put strain on the knees, such as Cat/Cow, Parighasana, and Balasana. It is important to keep the body safe and comfortable during pregnancy. All recommended postures and modifications should feel good, and if they do not feel right for a particular practice, pregnancy or circumstance, they should not be practiced.

Many standing postures and balance postures, including Virabhadrasana 1 and 2 and Vrksasana can be practiced **against the wall** for more stability. Sun salutations and postures that put strain on the wrists, such as Adho-Mukha-Svanasana, can also be practiced against the wall. The chemical released in the body during pregnancy, “Relaxin” can put added strain on joints, especially the wrists and the wall helps to alleviate this joint pressure with various postures. Balance postures are great during pregnancy to help maintain balance as the body changes, but always take precautions to avoid a fall.



Vrksasana with wall



Adho-Mukha-Svanasana with wall

Blocks are an essential tool for prenatal yoga, as they help with gentle forward bends, such as Ardha Uttanasana and Prasarita Padottanasana.



Uttanasana with 2 Blocks



Prasarita Padottanasana with 2 Blocks

Blocks can also assist in balance if used to anchor the foot against the wall for standing postures such as Trikonasana and Virabhadrasana 1 and 2.



Virabhadrasana 2 with a block as an anchor against the wall



Trikonasana with a block anchor against wall

Blocks can also assist to alleviate wrist pressure in Adho-Mukha-Svanasana



A block is also a great tool for Setu Bandha Sarvangasana when placed under the sacrum for support. Most backbends are prohibited while pregnant, but you can still get the benefits of a gentle backbend when using the appropriate props. This posture feels great for back pain, but is also extremely restorative and helps to relax and calm the mind.

Yoga with my 2 year old is a challenge sometimes, but it is also sometimes a reality and I try to make it fun for him as well as for me.



Supported Setu Bandha Sarvangasana with a block under the sacrum

Always use support (a block or the wall) during lunges, especially after the first trimester, because of the force in the knee.



Lizard Pose with blocks



Low Lunge with blocks

A **chair** may also be used for added stability for balance postures such as Ardha Candrasana 2.



Cushions or bolsters can be used for seated postures and hip openers such as pigeon, under the knees to prevent strain, and in Ustrasana to modify the intense backbend.



Pigeon with bolster



Ustrasana with bolster

A bolster is also beneficial when practicing Malasana for added balance.



Malasana with bolster

Straps can be used in gentle forward folds, and postures such as Janu Sirsasana and Upavista Konasana. Make sure when practicing forward folds that you are leaving plenty of room for the baby and folding gently, never allowing strain or compression to the belly.



Upavista Konasana with strap



Janu Sirsasana with strap

Since it is best to avoid postures lying on your back after the first 12 weeks of pregnancy, Savasana can be practiced by lying on your side with a bolster for support, or you can prop yourself up to a slight angle using a bolster, blanket and blocks.



Savasana - bolster, blanket, and block

If your practice is strong and you wish to try mild, restorative inversions, modified Sirsasana against the wall using 3 blocks is easily accessible, creates space in the abdomen for baby and helps build arms and shoulder muscles while pregnant. Salamba Sarvangasana can also be practiced against the wall using blankets and the wall as a support, or as shown below, with a block under the sacrum. As I mentioned previously, inversions are not practiced during pregnancy in many schools and styles of yoga. They are primarily practiced in the Iyengar practices of yoga and are not recommended for beginners or those who do not have a previous yoga practice with inversions. It is also important to learn from a knowledgeable teacher and use the necessary precautions and props. If discomfort of any sort is felt during any yoga practice during pregnancy, stop immediately.



Sirsasana against the wall, 3 blocks Salamba Sarvangasana, block at sacrum

It is always important to remember that everyone's body and pregnancy is different, so the bottom-line is, if it doesn't feel good don't do it.

4. Yoga and Ayurveda: A Guide to Eating and Self-Care During Pregnancy

Ayurveda is a comprehensive and natural healing system that covers all aspects of our being, including mental, physical, emotional and spiritual. In Sanskrit, Ayurveda means "the science/knowledge of life/longevity." Ayurveda is an ancient practice of medicine in India and is not only a system of medicine and

healing, but also a framework of living a healthy life with a peaceful mind (Margo Bachman).

A Healthy Pregnancy Diet

Eating a healthy diet and taking care of your body is a huge part of yoga and extremely beneficial throughout pregnancy. I will be the first to admit that throughout my pregnancy, especially the first trimester, eating healthy was actually much more challenging than I thought it would be. I usually eat a very healthy clean diet, and naturally assumed that this would carry over throughout my pregnancy. While pregnant with both of my sons, I all of the sudden had the need for potato chips and French fries (something I usually do not even eat on a regular basis!) I was also amazed at my sudden dislike for green vegetables, especially salad. Suddenly, there were hundreds of foods that I just could not eat, including chicken, pork, and salad. I think I had such a hard time with meats because of the strong smells, but I have no idea why my body turned against salad. In my first trimester, I felt like I lived on oatmeal and bananas. The key is to eat in moderation and be gentle on yourself. Your body is going through a lot. I got my vegetables in by making daily green smoothies with berries, bananas, spinach and coconut water. It provided me with my daily greens, and also helped me stay hydrated, which is important because dehydration is very common when pregnant. Drinking water is essential, but sometimes it just doesn't taste that great. I would mix a splash of cranberry juice in with my water to make it more bearable to drink. To fight junk food cravings, I allowed myself to treat myself on the weekends and I kept a lot of healthy food and satisfying snacks in the house such a Greek yogurt, fresh fruit and goat cheese and crackers. Every body craves different foods while pregnant so finding a healthy balance of whole nutritious foods that taste good and keep the body feeling satisfied and hydrated is important.

Grains

- Organic whole wheat, oats, basmati rice, barley, pasta made with organic whole grain, homemade bread from organic whole grain

Fruit

- Ripe, juicy sweet fruit
- Apples, pears, apricots, plums, pomegranates

Vegetables

- Carrots, celery, onion, tomatoes, cucumbers, sweet potatoes, green beans, mushrooms, lots of leafy greens and herbs

Nuts and Seeds

- Almonds, sesame seeds, coconut, macadamia nuts, walnuts, pine nuts

Fats

- Sesame oil, olive oil, mustard oil, ghee

Herbs

- Ginger, black pepper, celery seeds, cinnamon,

Milk Products

- Fresh cows milk (I like whole milk)
- Goat cheese
- Greek Yoghurt

Essential Oils

While not to be confused as a substitute to medicine or supplements recommended by your prenatal care provider, essential oils can help a variety of discomforts while pregnant. During my first pregnancy, I broke out in a terrible rash that lasted until I went into labor. I tried every product that I was allowed to try while pregnant. My doctor immediately recommended products like Benadryl and Sudafed. Not only did these not work, but also I hated taking such harsh products while pregnant. I finally started doing some research on essential oils and their healing qualities. Previously I had enjoyed essential oils added to my lotion or for a massage because they smelled nice. After some research and experimentation, I learned that they have many healing benefits other than just smelling nice. I used a mix of chamomile, lavender and tea tree oil in a warm bath and topically on my skin mixed with coconut oil to soothe my rash. While it was a battle for nearly 5 months of my pregnancy, the oils helped it to go away and when I did break out again, they helped to treat it. I also switched to otherwise all unscented products and watched carefully what I put on my skin and hair.

Essential Oils were extremely helpful for me throughout my pregnancy and help to aid a lot of different ailments and discomforts. I used lavender and sandalwood oils in a diffuser to relax and help me sleep at night and peppermint oil helped in my first trimester to combat nausea and morning sickness. It also was a wonderful relief for sore muscles and aching feet towards the end of my pregnancy. I massaged it into sore parts of my back and added a couple of drops to a foot soak at the end of the day to help with soreness and swelling. Geranium is supposed to help during pregnancy (or otherwise) to help balance hormones. While the geranium smelled beautiful and I really enjoyed putting a little bit on before I would meditate, I think it might have been the meditation and pranayama that aided in my mental clarity more so than the geranium oil. It is worth a try though!

Peppermint oil – nausea, sore muscles

Geranium - balance hormones

Lavender – soothing

Chamomile – skin rashes – add to bath or unscented lotion

Sandalwood – improves sleep

Skin Care

Avoid toxins; use natural deodorant (which I really recommend even when not pregnant), no salicylic acid, BHAs or AHAs.

Sweet almond oil does wonders for a relaxing self-massage, hydration for dry skin, and prevention in stretch marks. I used it religiously in both of my pregnancies and did not get a single stretch mark.

Body Care

Massage/Therapy Balls for sore back, feet, sacrum and neck

Self-Massage or prenatal massage

Silk eye pillow is great for relaxation, especially when you add a couple drops of sandalwood and lavender essential oils. It is soothing during a restorative yoga practice and I have one that can be heated and this was wonderful for stomach discomfort, ligament pains and cramping.

5. Pranayama, Meditation and Pregnancy

In Sanskrit, *Prana* literally means “life force” and our breath is what connects our minds to our bodies. It is so helpful during pregnancy to have a pranayama and meditation practice and can help to calm the mind, relax the nerves and the body, alleviate headaches and soothe raging hormones and emotions. It also helps with digestion, lack of sleep and high stress.

Throughout my first trimester, I was very nauseous with terrible hormonal headaches and extremely fatigued. It was very hard to practice any asana practice. And in fact, it is the most restrictive trimester in maintaining an asana practice because the fetus is at it's most vulnerable state and the risk of miscarriage is at it's highest. I had to be extremely cautious about what I practiced and really had to tone down my physical practice. Meditation and pranayama were extremely beneficial. I loved practicing mantra meditations and focusing on my family, my love for my children and my health. Many intense pranayama practices should be avoided while pregnant, and honestly, many of the ones that are safe to practice gave me anxiety during pregnancy. It is important that you do not hold the breath while practicing pranayama and avoid practicing intense pranayama practices such as Ujjayi, Viloma, and Kapalabhati. Some of the practices that are safe during pregnancy are Anapana, or breath awareness, and Belly Breathing. My favorite pranayama practice during pregnancy was simply a gentle belly breathing and this was wonderful in helping me control my hormones and emotions and helped me to relax.

In addition to pranayama, meditation is so helpful during pregnancy because it improves the ability to relax and concentrate and can help aid with fatigue, anxiety and stress levels. I will admit that when you are pregnant is not the time to devote yourself to new heights of prolonged meditation in search of inner-peace and enlightenment. If this is your goal, you will likely become discouraged in your practice. I found that my concentration was lower than usual and it was harder to remain in a comfortable seated position for as long while pregnant, especially in my third trimester. This is understandable with all that is going on in the body and I think that anyone practicing meditation while pregnant needs to

understand and accept these limitations and be gentle on the mind, as well as the body. I would try to practice 5-10 minute increments and it was easy to remain comfortable and focused and I felt so clear and recharged when I was finished. I found that doing Simple Breath Focused Meditation focusing on inhalations and exhalations was calming, simple and effective throughout my pregnancy. Simple Breath Focused Meditation can help to bring centering and inner awareness and helps to improve mental clarity and reduces anxiety. I also enjoyed practicing a Mantra Meditation during pregnancy as it helped me stay focused the best. A Mantra is traditionally a religious or mystical syllable or poem; however, it can be any word, phrase or prayer that is meaningful. I would focus on love, my nurturing powers as a mother, and family. This helped me stay focused and keep my intentions on my family and my children strong. Mantra Meditations are helpful in redirecting the mind with a positive focus and this is so beneficial when you are pregnant, tired and losing focus on priorities and family. Sometimes when you are dead exhausted from pregnancy and chasing a 2-year old around it is hard to remember the miracle of being pregnant and the joy and love that having a baby and creating a family brings. Even five minutes of meditation in the morning or evening helped me realign my intentions for the day and find peace and joy in what can sometimes be stressful moments of motherhood.

In general, my asana, meditation and pranayama practice helped me to keep energy and sleep better, even when I was uncomfortable at night. The key is to be gentle on yourself and your body. Deep relaxation is so healthy for the body as well as the mind and the benefits when pregnant are wonderful.

Section 6: Asana Practice - Postures for Prenatal Practice and Benefits

This sequence is designed to be a 60-minute class if practiced in entirety. However, all the postures included are beneficial for pre and postnatal practice and can be used separately or the sequence can be shortened. Especially during my first trimester and the end of my third trimester, any practice longer than 30 minutes became more tiring for me and I opted for shorter practices, sometimes multiple times throughout the day. Often, I would practice for 15 minutes in the morning the help give me energy and start my day, and practice 10 or 15 minutes in the evening to help me relax, fall asleep and improve circulation in my body. There are many options for a prenatal yoga practice and each individual has to do what feels best for their body. It is important to be easy on the body and drink plenty of water before, during if necessary, and after your practice. All postures included in this sequence are restorative and safe for beginners. Necessary props include a blanket, a bolster, a strap and 2 blocks. Practicing near a wall for added support is helpful.

Prenatal Yoga Sequence

5 minute Simple Breath Focused Meditation sitting in Sukhasana

Baddha Konasana - remain upright, sit on a blanket

- Soothes back pain
- Helps eliminate vaginal discharge
- Corrects pressure of the uterus on the large veins in the pelvis, which can cause obstruction in circulation resulting in fluid retention
- Gives freedom to pelvic floor muscles
- Relieves compression of the vagina

Bharadvajasana – sit on a blanket - very gentle twist (avoid during first trimester)

- Helps relieve backache

Cat/cow (use blanket under knees for support) – 5-6 rounds

- Helps relieve backache

Tadasana – spread feet wider than traditional variation

- Counteracts cramps in the calf muscles during the night.
- Counteracts curvature of the spine and pain in the hip.
- Helps with good alignment and posture, which can suffer during pregnancy because of enlarged uterus.

Urdhva Hastasana - with a block in between hands

- Tones the shoulders and lifts the spine
- Revitalizes the body and mind

Gomukasana in Tadasana

- Good for arthritis, stiffness in the neck, shoulders, and wrist.
- Do not practice or use precaution during first trimester.

Garudasana arms in Tadasana

- Relieves tightness in shoulders

Ardha Chandrasana 1 (Right and left side)

Ardha Uttanasana with blocks

- Alleviates depression
- Calms the mind
- Creates space for fetus to grow and expand
- Soothes lower back pain

Virabhadrasana 2

- Brings lightness to abdominal area
- Reduces morning sickness
- Improves digestion
- Strengthens pelvic region

Trikonasana

- Relieves backache and neck ache, frees space for the diaphragm
- Practice with precaution if experiencing nausea.

Adho Mukha Svanasana - with legs wide, using 2 blocks under hands, or half dog at the wall

- Use blocks or blankets under the head for support, or do half dog against the wall
- Increases blood supply to the brain
- Eliminates fatigue
- Tones the nervous system and aids with mood swings and forgetfulness

- Extends the spine and aids with lower back pain
- Lessens swelling of legs and ankles

Prasarita Padottanasana - use 2 blocks for support

- Develops and strengthens ligaments of the and muscles of the feet, knees, legs and hips
- Stretches and widens pelvic region
- Improves breathing and rests heart
- Increases blood circulation
- Reduces heaviness and pressure in the pelvic and abdominal regions
- Soothes nervous system
- Relieves morning sickness and nausea

Parighasana (Gate pose) – side lateral bend right and left

- Lengthens and softens the abdominal wall

Lizard with Block

- Strengthens pelvic floor, great for postnatal recovery of the pelvic floor and brings blood flow back into the pelvic floor

Malasana (avoid if spotting, have hemorrhoids, and after 35 weeks if the baby is in breech) – use a bolster for balance if necessary

- Assists to prepare for an easier labor

Upavita Konasana – with strap

- Improves circulation of blood in the pelvis and abdomen (also very helpful for postnatal recovery)
- Tones kidneys which is helpful for urinary problems during pregnancy

Janu Sirsasana – with strap

- Relieves heaviness in lower back, abdomen, and tailbone
- Helps flush the bladder

Child's pose with a block under the head, spread knees wide to make room for the belly

- Helps relieve back pain
- Calms the mind and the body

Savasana lying on left side with a bolster and block (8 minutes)

The End of My Journey

I never imagined the knowledge and possibilities that would open up to my yoga practice when I began my Yoga Teacher training while pregnant. At first, I thought I would not get as much out of the training as I would while pregnant and thought that I would be too limited physically to practice most of what I was learning. In some ways, it was restricting. But then, I had an epiphany. I realized that I had my entire life to practice yoga when I was not pregnant and my Yoga Teacher training was neither the beginning nor the end of my practice and my education. Being able to set my ego aside and learn how to modify my practice and accept where I was at this particular point in my life was much more of a gift than mastering the perfect arm balance. There were times I felt discouraged by what I could not practice, but then realized that my entire life was ahead of me

and that learning to be a yoga teacher was not about perfecting challenging postures, but learning to modify the practice of yoga to teach a variety of different students and circumstances. And that was exactly what going through my training pregnant really taught me. It was a gift to be able to learn a posture, not as an experienced yogi, but as a yogi with restrictions and physical limitations. Eventually I can master the perfect Bhujapidasana if it suits my practice, but for now I am learning to be present, be grateful for where I am and I am learning to modify my practice for the ever-changing circumstances and limitations that life will always bring, especially as a mother.

Prenatal yoga is a wonderful gift for the physical body, it helped me stay healthy and helped so many discomforts and ailments experienced during pregnancy. The list of physical and health benefits are endless. However, the real benefits of prenatal yoga go much deeper than the physical. It helped me to stay present in the moment and appreciate the place I was at in my life. It not only helped me find gratitude in my pregnancy and my baby, but it helped me find peace and gratitude in being a mom to my 2-year old. It helped me to stay patient, centered and gentle with my son and taught me the gift of being strong but also flexible in my life. Being a mom is one of the greatest but also most challenging jobs in the world. Yoga has helped me to be a better mother, more patient, gentle and free-spirited. It has taught me to have fun with my child, to laugh at little things, and to let things go more easily. It has given me patience, a sense of humor, and sense or wonder towards the little moments in life. Whether it is feeling my unborn child hiccup inside of my belly or laughing over a silly book during our nightly story time before bed with my son, the little moments are the most miraculous and my strong yoga practice has helped me to connect to these moments and be present and grateful in my life. There is so much to be grateful for, and even though I started out this year expecting a monumental journey that would change my life and give me all of the things that I thought I was missing in my career and as an individual, what it really did was bring me back to exactly where I was originally and taught me to be grateful for the best thing in my life, my children. Learning about ourselves through yoga often teaches us that the answers we were looking for were within us all along. While I did learn a lot about yoga and myself and I did create opportunities for a new career for my future, really nothing changed except my perspective and my gratitude for the life that I already had.