

Yoga for Women

by Emma Balnaves

A practical guide for women in the three important stages of her life - menstruation, pregnancy & menopause



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*Please note the advice on asanas given for these three stages is general information. Each person is different and therefore if there are specific difficulties and ailments one needs to follow the guidance of a qualified teacher.

Hatha Yoga is practiced to cultivate and strengthen the woman's reproductive system. This is her seat of power in the body and when the energy here is kept in a healthy state, the woman's health has equilibrium.

The utilisation of different asanas helps to make space in the body allowing a free passage for the prana (life force) to exist.

The most important thing for a woman to look after is her Blood, as every month it is lost during menstruation. If the blood is not maintained in good health then all kinds of diseases will come about. When the blood becomes weak it causes the respiration to decline, bones to lose density and the agni (fire) to deplete, which depletes the life force (prana). Once the agni (fire) becomes weak women are susceptible to all

kinds of illness since it is the fire that keeps the light in the body and absorbs and digests everything, including food and thoughts. Stagnation of the blood comes about when the prana (life force) is not moving in the body. Most of the menstrual problems stem from stagnant blood in the lower abdomen (reproductive area). Common diseases caused by stagnant blood are:

Amenorrhea – absence of menstruation

Dysmenorrhea – painful menstruation
Uterine hemorrhage, tumors, fibroids & ovarian cysts.

The practice of yoga for women varies from men at the three important transition times – menstruation, pregnancy and menopause. At these different stages it is important to use the practices of yogasana, mudra and pranayama to support the transitions.

Menstruation

Menstruation starts at about 12 years and ends between 45 and 55 years. When the menstruation appears between 12-20 years it is normal. When it appears as early as 9 or 10 years and as late as 28 years it should be considered abnormal. In most cases the proper age is 13 – 20 years as the organs are matured by this time.

There are various types of menstrual fluid; each type of menstrual secretion takes 24 hours to fully manifest.

A number of diseases connected with menstruation respond well when treated with the yogasana. The treatment varies according to each woman's symptoms.

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Menstruation is a time of cleansing and reflection for the woman. During the first three days of the cycle when the bleeding is heaviest women should rest and only do supported asanas as these give maximum benefits.

Recommended asanas: -
Supta baddha konasana
Upavishta konasana
Supta Padmasana or
supta swastikasana

Benefits of recommended asanas during the menstruation:

Supta Baddha Konasana works on the liver and spleen channels to relieve the stress from these organs which are taxed during menstruation. It also has a cooling action and is very beneficial for women who wish to conceive.

Upavishta Konasana stabilises apana vayu, the wind responsible for expulsion, which becomes over active during menstruation. This pose promotes even inhalation and exhalation. When practiced for a longer duration during menstruation it clears all diseases of the uterus.

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Supta Padmasana or **Supta Swastikasana** releases the groin, cleanses the ovaries and eases heat. Both are also good to relieve cramps.

All of the above asanas should be done with the use of a pillow or bolster either in the back (in the case of supta) **Or front** (in case of forward bending) **of the body.**

When there is cramping only supine poses such as supta virasana, supta mandukasana, supta baddha konasana, supta padmasana should be done. For women with low blood pressure it is important to increase the inhalation during the cycle, as exhalation is naturally longer due to the apana vayu activity of expelling the blood. So only supine poses should be done to increase the inhale and maintain the health of the blood during this time.

When there is headache (pressure in the ears, eyes or sinuses) use a bandage to blind fold the head, eyes and ears to release the pressure and perform the asanas according to your body's needs at that time. Use the guidance on recommended asanas and breathing mentioned above regarding low blood pressure, cramps etc.

Headaches come sometimes before or after the menstruation due to Pitta aggravation caused by heat not being pulled down and staying too much in the head. It is important to look at one's diet and daily activities to avoid too much heat during, before or just after the cycle. It is very common for women in their late 30's and early 40's for this to occur due to the hormonal changes at this time and an increase in one's internal fire.

*Note – intercourse and strong physical activities should not be done during menstruation as it will cause problems later on in life with the bones.

Premenstrual & Postmenstrual

One or two days before the cycle starts all asanas which put pressure on the abdomen should be stopped ie: mayurasana etc. no uddiyana bandha should be done. Once the red bleeding stops on the 4th or 5th day and if it is only light spotting a mild practice can be done and then one should finish with the menstrual poses listed above.



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Pregnancy

During pregnancy most things can be done except any asanas that put pressure on the abdomen. After the fifth month the practice needs to be adapted for the woman to create more space for the child growing in the womb. No uddiyana bandha should be done during pregnancy or while breast-feeding.

After the fifth month all the wide stances should be done to make space in the groin. Squatting up and down is good for rhythmic breathing, while it is important to maintain the work of the legs during the whole term of pregnancy to keep the health of the legs and apana vayu strong. Apana vayu is the wind that holds the child in the womb and is responsible to expel the child at its birth.

Some general information is listed below for women after the 5th month of pregnancy on what to practice but it always depends on the woman and what she needs at the time as some other asanas may also be required.

No inversions should be practiced after the 5th month.

Recommended asanas are Mandukasana, Samakonasana/ Hanumanasana, Upavistha konasana, Baddha konasana, Bhadrasana, Bharadvajasana 1 & 2, Padmasana, all supine poses to finish, Viparita karani (legs up wall).

Asanas to be avoided during pregnancy
Ardha baddha padma
paschimottanasana, Janu sirasana 2,
Supta padangusthasana, Trikonasana,
Baddha padmasana, Ubhaya
padangusthasana, Marichyasana, Yoga
nidrasana, Buddhasana, Durvasana,
Cakorasana, Gandabherundasana,
Bakasana, Koundinyasana, Urdhva

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kukkuttasana, Garbha pindasana, Tolasana. Dhanurasana, Salabhasana.

Poses to avoid during conception are Krounchasana, Supta konasana, dwipada sirsanasana.

Inversions can be done up until the fifth month and should then be stopped.

Pregnancy Care

Daily oil massage (leave oil on the body for 30-40 minutes, then wash off in bath or shower). Avoid scented oil. It is best to use light body oil such as jojoba or almond oil.



Menopause

Menopause is the time of wisdom for the woman. All her life blood has flowed out of her body during menstruation and at menopause this fire is reversed and it moves upwards. It is very important to maintain the health of the bones at this time so weight-bearing asanas are advised.

All the stances and sun forms are beneficial at this time where the legs have to bear weight. Apana vayu needs to be strengthened as people get older because the legs weaken. Once the legs go the rest of the body follows. As the saying goes 'old people die from the feet up'.

The strength of agni and the blood will be maintained with the legwork in the stances and sun forms. For women who suffer from ailments such as hot flushes, mental tensions or headaches the guidance of the teacher is important as each woman's requirements are different.

Generally the hot flushes come due to the excess of pitta in the body and that has to come out! General asanas, which help for this, are Ardha baddha padma paschimottanasana, Ardha matsyendrasana, and Supta padmasana.

Sitali or sheetalī pranayama is also recommended for their cooling benefits.

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During times of transition the mind may become unstable. After the age of fifty Vata can easily increase as this is the age of Vata for both men and women. Anything done with too much speed will increase disturbance of the mind. Movements should be slow and weight bearing, paying close attention to the rhythm of the breath and position of the tongue to the roof of the palate during practice. This will allow the mind to stabilise.

Breasts

The care of the breasts is very important as the breasts and nipples are connected to the ovaries. Any problems in the breasts will also directly affect the ovaries and vice-versa. Daily oil massage before showering is helpful for lumpy or swollen breasts.

According to Chinese medicine liver stagnation is the main cause of breast lumps. One reason for this is that the liver meridian (energy pathway) is connected by internal pathways to the breasts. Liver stagnation based on emotional stress is especially common among women.

Cysts & Fibroids

Both cysts and fibroids come about due to stress, genetics, diet and lifestyle. Castor oil application applied with a warm compress can help dissolve the cysts or fibroids in the area of the breast or uterus. When they are too big in size they often need to be surgically removed. Yogasanas and herbs can be used to help the healing after surgery. Generally the best asanas are Ardha baddha padma paschimottanasana, Upavistha konasana, Supta baddha konasana & Supta padmasana.



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