

# yoga for women



Men and women both share the same physical blueprint for healthy and harmonious alignment. However, there are fundamental physical differences between the sexes (not just the obvious!) and an appreciation of these may help you practise with more sensitivity

BY AYALA GILL

As women, we are constantly adapting physically and emotionally to our changing bodies and roles. As we change – not only month to month, but through adolescence, pregnancy, motherhood and beyond – our yoga practice can change to support us.

For me, this is a great blessing because it compels me to be more sensitive. The more I listen to myself in my yoga practice and respond to what I actually need (rather than what I want, or think I need), the better it supports me.

A deep connection to what is going on in the moment – whether we like that experience or not – can lead us to a yoga practice that is authentic and transformative. Authentic because we are responding in a genuine, honest way to ourselves rather than being ruled by our ego or our fears; and transformative because we can only grow when we begin where we are right now, rather than where we think we should be.



116 everyone try yoga

## HOW IS A WOMAN'S BODY DIFFERENT?

### 1. Lower centre of gravity

Broader hips mean that a woman's centre of gravity is generally in her pelvis, whereas a man's is in his broader chest. This affects the way we do poses such as arm balances (such as crow, handstand) and push-up (a), (chaturanga dandasana) because here our centre of gravity is further from our foundation – in this case our hands. Because our weight feels very heavy in our arms, we might skip these poses, mistakenly assuming that lack of arm strength is the sole issue.

**Try this:** Work the legs more strongly (to feel this action in chaturanga try squeezing a block between the thighs as shown). Doing this redistributes the weight of our pelvis and we are better able to access the exhilaration that these poses offer.

### 2. Broader hips

A man's thigh bones are set close together and travel more directly up to the pelvis than a woman's, which are set wider apart and turn more of a corner at the hip socket.

The result is that we can struggle to get the correct actions of the inner legs in front-facing poses, such as intense side stretch, parsvottanasana (see b, over) and warrior 1, and in seated forward bends if we do them with the classical alignment of feet together.

**Try this:** Wider stance – place your feet hip-width apart in these poses to make the correct actions of the inner legs more accessible (inner legs lifting up, inner groins moving backwards and apart). Then lengthen your tailbone down and firm the outer hips. This creates a harmonious alignment of the legs, pelvis and spine, which in turn creates lightness and lift in the inner body.

### 3. Less muscular bulk

This is a mixed blessing. On the one hand we have a greater range of movement because we are not restricted by tightness or muscular bulk, but on the other hand we can't rely on natural stiffness to keep our joints stable. On top of this, hormonal changes during menstruation, pregnancy and breast-feeding soften the ligament support around our joints and, as we age, our muscles tend to move away from our bones.

**Try this:** Engage the muscles so that they come close to the bones and the arms and legs draw towards the midline. This integrates and stabilises the muscles and joints, from which we can then extend outwards safely.



while expanding our inner body effortlessly.

### 4. Sacroiliac joint

Women are eight to ten times more likely to suffer from sacroiliac pain than men. The sacroiliac joint (c), which consists of a series of ligaments joining the sacrum (the flat upside-down triangle-shaped bone at the base of the spine) to the pelvis, is not designed for a large range of movement since its major function is stability. A woman's wider hips mean that everyday activities such as walking create more movement in this joint than in men. Our wider pelvis also means that the joint is shallower, so a smaller part of the sacrum is able to attach to the pelvis. Add to this the hormonal softening of ligaments at certain times of the month and we have an area that is always going to be vulnerable in women. Yoga can help strengthen the supporting muscles, and correct alignment can prevent sacroiliac pain occurring in the first place.

**Try this:** Simple backbends – locust (d), cobra and bow pose can strengthen the supporting muscles as long as



they are practised correctly (with thighs spiralling inwards, buttock muscles firm and tailbone lengthening away from the sacrum) so that the area stays broad.

Take care also in twists and forward bends. We may think of these as primarily a movement of the spine, but if we leave the pelvis behind it's the sacroiliac joint nestling between them that takes the strain. The answer once again lies in working the legs correctly, so that with the thighs fixed we can initiate forward bending or twisting from the pelvis and so protect the sacroiliac joint.

### 5. The reproductive organs

The way we hold our belly influences how effectively our reproductive and digestive organs function. In our culture, many women aspire to a flat stomach and may have been pulling in their abdominal muscles for most of their adult lives. It's not just body consciousness that can cause a perpetually gripped abdomen; stress, fear and anxiety can also often manifest in this way. Hardening the diaphragm and belly – and the throat too – causes us to feel less and is often an automatic response when we feel overwhelmed.

We may not even realise how 'gripped' we are in the belly since many of us feel disconnected from this area. This may be because of previous trauma, or simply because of living in a headstrong culture in which our body can feel like another (little-visited) planet!

All of this reduces circulation to these vital organs, and can lead to fertility, menstrual and digestive issues. To function properly, our digestive and reproductive organs need to be elongated and soft (e), rather than constricted or congested, and the supporting muscles long and strong rather than permanently cramped. Yoga teaches us how to tone and align the body for this to happen.

**Try this: 1)** Neutral pelvis – standing so that the pelvis is neutral, not tilted forwards or back, holds organs in their proper place. The abdominal muscles can then do their real job of helping us to breathe, aligning the pelvis, containing the organs and assisting with stability and movement of the torso.

**2)** Breathe into the belly. On a psychological level,



yoga encourages us to be open to what we are feeling, both good and bad. The more we do this, the less our need to 'keep it all in', packed away in tight, hard muscles, and the more we learn to welcome (or at least acknowledge) the experiences that come our way. In directing our attention to the belly through breathing, stretching and strengthening, we can begin to reacquire ourselves with this area. This is the first step on a long journey of self-acceptance, which culminates in letting go of the distorted image of ourselves we may have been holding on to, and celebrating the person we are.

### BODY IMAGE AND EATING DISORDERS

Psychological and emotional factors are complex in relation to compulsive eating disorders: triggers can range from controlling food to gain a sense of control in a world that increasingly fails to make sense, to using food to block out overwhelming emotions and pain.

A 2004 study published in the *Psychology of Women Quarterly*<sup>1</sup> found that women who practised yoga had a healthier attitude towards their bodies and

researcher found that the women who did aerobic exercise.

A well-rounded yoga practice can support women with eating disorders in many ways. Standing poses help with feeling strong and grounded, teaching you to find your own power and presence in the world. Backbends, such as locust, bow and *urdhva dhanurasana* (pictured below), open up the chest and increase vitality and capacity to feel loving, towards yourself as well as others. Inversions are emotionally balancing and stabilising.

It is important, however, that you are honest with yourself and are not using your practice to fuel your compulsion further: are you drawn to a rigorous practice as a means to burn more calories? If you are attracted to a dynamic practice, instead of using it as another tool for control, can you learn to apply curiosity and loving attention to your body in the more physically demanding poses?

When your attention is harnessed in a loving way towards exploring strength, flexibility and balance, there may no longer be room for your compulsive inner critic to be at the forefront. Over time you may find the courage to apply this same attention to whatever thoughts and feelings reveal themselves in your final relaxation (*savasana*). Because the focus of a yoga practice is on feeling your body from the inside, rather than on appearance, you begin to find security in a new feeling of wholeness and slowly build courage to meet painful parts of yourself.



## menstrual practice – the basics

**1. Create space.** Choose poses which bring gentle elongation and breadth to the reproductive organs, liver and kidneys. These include forward bends, gentle backbends, seated and supine poses (a), all of which should be well supported by props so that the front and back of the body remain long and broad. For a detailed description of menstrual practices, see Lois Steinberg's *Geeta S. Iyengar's Guide to a Woman's Yoga Practice*, volume 1, or Linda Sparrowe and Patricia Walden's *The Woman's Book of Yoga and Health*.

**2. Head off headaches.** If your head is feeling heavy due to tension, begin your practice with a child's pose (*balasana*), cross-legged forward bend (*adha mukha svastikasana*) or standing forward bend (*uttanasana*) (b), all with your head resting on a chair or bolsters.

**3. Relieve pain.** If you are having heavy bleeding or a painful period, try half moon pose (*ardha chandrasana*) (c) against the wall to make space in the pelvis and abdomen. According to Geeta Iyengar, this pose also has a drying effect on the uterus.

**4. Energise hard-working liver and kidneys.** Try Yin yoga poses emphasising the kidney meridian (butterfly pose (d), seal pose) and liver meridian (shoelace pose (e), dragonfly pose). According to Chinese medicine, the kidney chi (energy) supports our reproductive health, whilst the liver chi helps to balance our emotions. For a detailed description of these poses, see *Insight Yoga* by Sarah Powers.

**5. Check in with yourself.** I use these quiet menstrual poses to notice whether I've been practising from my ego or whether I have been giving myself what I really need to nourish my body and spirit. Many women begin a practice of attuning with themselves during their monthly cycle, and in time begin to apply this sensitive listening to each practice, each day.





a



b



c



d



e

## PRACTISING DURING YOUR PERIOD

I like the term 'moon cycle', which is increasingly being used in yoga to describe our period, because the way we feel it sometimes mirrors the moon's waxing and waning (the word 'menstruation' is also related to the word 'moon'). We move from feeling light, outgoing and creative to becoming darker, more reflective and withdrawn. During our period, the body cleans out the uterus and gathers the general hormonal detritus that has built up during the month and moves it out with the menstrual blood. This is a time when the liver and kidneys, as organs of detoxification, have to work hard.

If we ignore what our body is trying to do and plough on with our regular active practice, we risk interfering with this natural process of renewal. But if we don't practise at all during our period, we will miss out on the benefits of yoga – namely supporting the organs so they can do their job well, which will minimise discomfort and irregularities in our cycle.

Energetically, the downward energy of *apana vayu* is increased (see page 167). Crucially for menstruation, this helps us with elimination. During this time I want to support this releasing of energy, so I do not practise inversions. Inversions also pull your uterus towards your waist, which can cause the broad ligaments around it to overstretch.

What's more, inversions require the legs to be very active to support the spine. During menstruation the legs should not be overexerted as they relate to the earth and fire elements which both need to be pacified for a healthy hormonal balance at this time, according to women's yoga expert Geeta Iyengar.<sup>2</sup> For this reason she advises avoiding strenuous standing poses, and doing those that are recommended with the support of the wall.

Finally, I also avoid all poses which harden or strongly twist the abdomen, such as push-up (*chaturanga dandasana*), boat pose (*navasana*) and half lord of the fishes pose (*ardha matsyendrasana*). Your period is not the time to push forward in your practice, but to make space in your body and direct your breath downwards to wherever you feel hardness or cramping.

## FERTILITY – HOW YOGA CAN SUPPORT YOU

Yoga has an important role in supporting fertility. In yoga, infertility implies an imbalance in the *svadhisthana* chakra: the energy centre located between the navel and pubic bone that controls the reproductive organs. Having a chronically 'gripped' abdomen diminishes the energy circulating in this area. The restorative or Yin practices suggested for menstruation are also beneficial for improving fertility since they support the reproductive system. When you are not menstruating, a regular inversion practice is also essential to maintain hormonal balance (inversions nourish the pituitary, pineal and thyroid glands). Supported inversions, such as legs-up-the-wall pose (*viparita karani*), and shoulder stand with a chair (*salamba sarvangasana*, right) allow you to stay longer in the poses and receive more benefit.

### Balancing masculine and feminine

From a traditional Chinese medical perspective, we can also address infertility by considering where there is an imbalance between the masculine and feminine aspects of ourselves. The Taoist principles of *yin* and *yang* suggest that *yin* embodies the feminine and *yang* the masculine. When these two elements are out of balance, there is disease in the body. It has been well documented, for example, that some women who overemphasise *yang* activities (heating, upward moving and dynamic, such as strong athletic training, or a strong dynamic yoga practice) can find their menstrual cycle is disrupted or stops altogether. The way a woman's body responds to such activities will depend on her individual constitution.

If we understand our physical/emotional/mental make-up more clearly (with the support of an Ayurvedic practitioner or traditional Chinese doctor, for instance) we can choose a yoga practice that brings genuine balance. But ultimately the style of yoga you practise perhaps matters less than your capacity to bring the qualities you are looking to cultivate with you on to the mat. For fertility, our primary aims are to bring space and vitality to the lower belly, and to reduce our levels of stress.

shoulder stand (*salamba sarvangasana*) with chair



### Fertility and stress

Stress is one of the main enemies of fertility. The stress hormone adrenaline constricts blood vessels, possibly including those in the uterus, thus interfering with conception. Stress hormones also wreak havoc with the fertility hormones.

As if this weren't enough, after the age of 35 we start to produce less of these sex hormones, while our bodies also become less able to deal with stress hormones. So, according to Ayurvedic practitioner Dr Claudia Welch, we have a scenario where the impact of stress is more at the same time as our natural capacity to conceive is lessening.<sup>3</sup>

Even with all this evidence in favour of slowing down, it can be daunting to think what would happen if we stepped out of our stressful circumstances. Indeed, the stress of trying to conceive is itself enormous. A yoga practice can help us to shift our focus from a need to achieve towards being healthy and awake in this moment. We relax some grip on our desire to conceive, and focus instead on revitalising our body and opening our hearts to the possibility of conception.



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## PREGNANCY AND BIRTH

Pregnancy is a wonderful time to practise yoga. Because we are practising for our babies as well as ourselves, we have a greater responsibility than at other times. But we also have greater potential for benefit. On a physical level, we choose poses that make space for our babies as well as our breath. Our lungs, diaphragm and digestive organs all become compressed as our babies grow, so we learn how to lengthen the spine and broaden the diaphragm to maximise the space in the inner body. Hormones also cause joints to become more mobile, so we learn how to use our muscles to stabilise the joints and support our babies.

On an emotional and psychological level, our yoga practice is an opportunity to connect with our babies and listen to how we are really feeling. It is a time when all our tendencies – physical, emotional and mental – seem to become magnified, but at the same time our attention naturally moves towards our babies, leaving us more introverted and reflective. So while a lot of issues might arise during pregnancy, there is often a greater willingness to look closely at them. I see many women grow in strength and conviction during pregnancy: it is a time when we sift out what truly matters from what is simply demanding on our time. Sometimes women feel guilty if they are not enjoying

their pregnancy. One of the wonderful aspects of yoga philosophy is that instead of implying that pregnancy should be a blissful experience, we are simply guided towards connecting with ourselves, and offering the same love to ourselves that we are beginning to feel for our baby. As a result, we can start to feel some ease and spaciousness even in the midst of turmoil. Yoga explores ways to invite in everything that we are experiencing, including uncomfortable sensations or feelings of fear. As we allow these experiences to simply rest in loving attention, we wake up to the full technicolour spectrum of our lives.

When we discover that we are able to use these tools to remain present during the enormous challenge of giving birth, it can be profoundly empowering. I like to encourage women to aspire to a 'connected' birth above all. If our intention is to stay open to the experience of birth, with a willingness to listen to the signals from our body and baby without resistance, the chances of a natural delivery increase. When we are surrounded by others who are able to support this intention, it becomes still more powerful. If medical intervention is then genuinely needed, we can welcome it without feeling any sense of failure or disappointment. As women, we can endure incredible difficulty and challenge as long as we are both connected to that experience and supported through it by others.

## hot flushes

Nearly 70 per cent of British women experience hot flushes around menopause.<sup>4</sup> If these happen while we are asleep, night sweats can be so powerful that they wake us. Falling levels of oestrogen and other reproductive hormones are partly to blame, but stress, fatigue and intense periods of activity can also intensify these episodes. A yoga practice that is cooling and restorative, emphasising deep breathing, can help.

### HELP FOR HOT FLUSHES:

**1. Good breathing.** Probably your most important and accessible tool is to remember to breathe well! Research has shown that breathing with deep, slow inhalations that fill up the belly followed by long, smooth, slow exhalations can stop hot flushes in their tracks and reduce frequency by 50 to 60 per cent.<sup>5</sup> More refined breathing techniques include alternate nostril breathing (*nadi shodhana* (a), for instructions see page 168), which balances the hemispheres of the brain, soothing body and mind.

**2. Supported forward bends.** Practising these standing and seated, with your head resting on a bolster or chair (b), helps cool the body and calm the nervous system.



**3. Supported reclining poses.** Reclining bound angle pose (c) (*supta baddha konasana*) and reclining hero pose (*supta virasana*; see page 121 picture (a)) allow the belly to soften and the chest to open so that your breathing is more effective.

**4. Inversions.** These support the neuroendocrine system by allowing fresh, oxygenated blood to flow to your head and neck and can help to either jump-start a sluggish system or calm an overexcited one. If you already regularly practise headstand and shoulder stand, you should continue unless you feel any strain. Some women find doing headstand against the wall (or hanging from wall ropes in class) with the soles of the feet together or legs wide apart is more soothing, likewise shoulder stand supported by bolsters and a chair (see page 122). If these poses aren't in your regular practice, a gentler inversion such as supported bridge pose (d) (*setu bandha sarvangasana*) over bolsters is a powerful alternative.

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undergoing, seems an empty nest. Our degree of stress has a profound effect on our bodies and may influence which menopausal symptoms we have, how severe they are and how long they go on for.

Yoga can be a lifeline for women at this stage, reducing stress, stabilising body temperature, boosting mood and helping support a positive self-image during the transition. It is also increasingly recognised that a spiritual component in our lives contributes to greater happiness and health. Ultimately, our yoga practice takes us to the very core of existence, and the radical perspective that we are all expansive, loving and spacious at this core. When we align ourselves with this potential, we are more open to welcoming both change and the unknown into our lives.

### Fatigue

Tiredness is another common complaint around the menopause. Even women who have no other symptoms often feel that they lack vitality. This may be caused by depleted adrenals: the result of a stressful lifestyle coupled with the hormonal changes of menopause.

**Try this:** Begin your practice with supported reclining poses and forward bends, to help to pacify the adrenals and quieten the sympathetic ('fight or flight') nervous system. Then a well-rounded yoga practice including standing poses, backbends and twists will massage and stimulate the adrenal glands and replenish your energy levels.

### Anxiety, depression and mood swings

Fluctuations in progesterone and oestrogen contribute to erratic moods, as also happens during puberty. Too much oestrogen can tip us into anxiety; too much progesterone leaves us susceptible to depression.

**Try this:** Backbends, especially if they are supported by props, such as inverted staff pose (*viparita dandasana*) over a chair (see right) bring a lightness to the body and improve breathing and circulation, all of which counter feelings of depression. Inversions: legs-up-the-wall pose (*viparita karani*) are soothing for the nervous system, helping to ground you when you feel as though you are losing control of your

environment. As before, if stronger inversions such as headstand and shoulder stand are part of your practice, continue with these also.

### Reconnect and celebrate

How you feel about entering menopause in general, and getting older in particular, will also impact on your mood. Oestrogen is the hormone that makes us 'feminine', with thick hair, moist skin and a soft voice, so it is helpful to acknowledge a letting go of that part of yourself in order to welcome the next phase of your life. Yoga reconnects you to what is going on inside at this moment, to help you feel who you are, rather than what society thinks you ought to be. Instead of mourning lost youth, this can be an invitation to tap into the richness, strength and freedom of this stage of your life.

### AGEING

Yoga can help counteract the physical manifestations of ageing – keeping your joints and muscles moving freely, your organs supported and well-nourished with blood supply, and generally keeping you limber and self-reliant for longer. A yoga practice can be helpful for the common complaints of both arthritis and osteoporosis. For arthritis, do poses that encourage movement in your joints, very gently and without holding, to improve blood circulation, gain mobility and strengthen the surrounding ligaments and tissues. For osteoporosis, weight-bearing postures help to improve bone density, thereby preventing its onset, or reducing its effects if it is already present. Poses that are particularly beneficial include dog pose, most standing poses and in some



cases even handstand (see right) or upward-facing bow pose (*urdhva dhanurasana*) if you are up to it (and, if not, you can use props).

The physical side, of course, is only half the picture. Traditional Chinese medicine takes the view that a healthy woman experiences a 'second spring' after menopause. If she is well nourished and exercises appropriately, she can experience great vitality, clarity, energy, leadership and vision as she heads towards her sixties and beyond.

Nowadays, however, we revere youth above the wisdom and experience of age. When we are young, we have more energy and greater capacity to deal with stress - but for a reason. We are strong, but ignorant: we need that energy to make enough mistakes in order to learn and grow! As we get older - so long as we have been willing to learn from life - our wisdom allows us to direct our smaller reserves of energy sensitively and efficiently.

We may begin our yoga journey learning how to place ourselves in alignment in a pose, but the sensitivity that starts here in our body will grow over time and expand to include our heart and mind. This sensitivity is infinitely richer than the undirected buoyancy of youth. Once we finally elevate the wisdom of age above the energy of youth as a culture, it will also free us from our fear of change: plastic surgery to look younger, 'nip and tuck' post-elective C-section to look as if we have never had a baby will no longer be desirable. Instead we can embrace change - including growing older - as the greatest vehicle we have for genuine transformation and growth.



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