



Yoga for Two

Prenatal yoga is gaining significance on the health radar for mums-to-be. Jasmine Tham gets the lowdown on its benefits

PRENATAL YOGA CLASSES ARE WIDELY AVAILABLE THESE DAYS at the fitness centres and studios. According to Pallawi Ghosh, yoga instructor at True Yoga, the awareness of prenatal yoga and its benefits has increased recently, with mothers-to-be getting more conscious of the importance of a healthy pregnancy culminating in a smooth delivery.

Indeed, aside from the usual exercise routines for pregnant women, prenatal yoga is one of many exercise options out there for expectant mothers who want to keep active throughout pregnancy.

Prenatal yoga provides a great way for mums-to-be to relax, keep moving and be active throughout pregnancy. It allows mothers-to-be to bond, providing a forum for them to share stories and swap tips on their pregnancies.

Dr Loke Kah Leong, consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist from the Singapore Women's Clinic, encourages yoga as a form of exercise for pregnant women, provided she doesn't suffer from orthopaedic or back problems such as a slipped disc. In fact, he sees the benefits of yoga for pregnant ladies, especially in exercises involving breathing and meditation techniques, and also the various postures that contribute to muscle tone and increase in strength.

WHAT TO EXPECT IN PRENATAL YOGA CLASSES

A typical prenatal yoga class consists of poses that are geared toward common pregnancy issues such as back pain and swollen feet, while providing a safe and nurturing environment to prepare for childbirth and motherhood.

The class would include breathing (pranayama) and poses (asanas), with modifications by the teacher for the practice based on the student's experience level, the issues she is dealing with and the stage of pregnancy she is at.

According to Colleen Simmons, UK-certified prenatal yoga instructor who teaches freelance at various yoga centres here, these are the uses of pranayama and asanas:

- Breathing or pranayama – powerful techniques to ensure an abundant supply of oxygen for you and your child. General fitness will also improve as you will be shown how to make the best of your lung capacity even though baby is preventing your diaphragm from working properly – particularly useful in the last trimester.
- Yoga exercises or asanas – these work on the reproductive organs; strengthen the pelvis and spine and overall help your body to cope with the growing baby. At the subtle level, the asanas ensure optimum supply of blood and nutrients to the developing baby.

Other segments of the class may consist of meditation or visualisation. Both are designed to calm and focus the mind. Finally, the class closes with a relaxation session. The relaxation state is designed to be learnt and returned to whenever needed, even during labour.

DURING PREGNANCY

Strength, flexibility and well-being are increased, because when you practise yoga, you are not only stretching the muscles, you are also stretching the

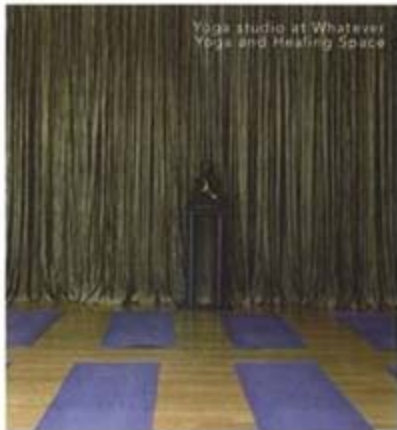
tissues that encase the muscles, stimulating your organ systems, promoting the circulation of blood flow and oxygen, breathing more intentionally, and focusing your attention inward through meditation. The combined effect promotes a heightened state of physical and emotional well-being.

Prenatal yoga also helps reduce back pain as specific yoga poses stretch the back muscles, hamstrings and hip flexors, helping the back to be stronger and less susceptible to injury. With correct alignment and posture, the degree of pelvic tilt associated with pregnancy and the lower back pain it causes can be improved.

Prenatal yoga reduces aches and fatigue. This is useful for pregnant women because as baby grows, a good night's sleep becomes less likely due to spinal alignment being compromised during sleep. Swelling and inflammation around the joints are reduced as blood and oxygen circulation is improved. This is especially important for the legs and reduction of varicose veins.

Emotionally, prenatal yoga classes bring women together when they are at a similar stage of their lives. The bonding of women drawn together during childbirth forms an excellent support system.

Tan Pei Pei, currently 27 weeks into her pregnancy and who takes classes at True Yoga, says



Tips for picking the right instructor

- Always ask for a qualified instructor
- Inquire about the instructor's experience
- Get references from other prenatal yoga students
- Make sure that the instructor is willing to give you individual attention
- You must feel comfortable with your instructor. Never attempt postures you don't feel 'safe' trying out

that the classes have helped her cope better with the changes in her body during pregnancy, physically, mentally and also emotionally. Yoga has helped her to increase strength, stamina, flexibility and awareness of her own body. It has also helped reduce fatigue and improve relaxation. "I have been eating and sleeping well throughout my pregnancy," she says.

Another regular prenatal yoga student is Cindy Tan, who attends classes at Gaia Yoga Centre. She finds that the sessions have relieved common complaints like backaches, swollen feet and fatigue.

DURING LABOUR

Benefits of prenatal yoga come into play during labour as well. Mentally, the tools of meditation and visual imagery come in useful when it is time to ride through the most powerful of contractions. According to Simmons, visual imagery combined with breathwork can be one of the most useful labour tools.

Ghosh from True Yoga says, "Physically, prenatal yoga aids in strengthening the spine and encourages the lower back to lengthen downwards, which enables the uterus to be cupped securely in the pelvis." This way, the baby's weight is borne through the hips and legs rather than on the lower back.

Yoga in the various trimesters

As a general guideline, Simmons who teaches at Babies n' Cream, Whatever Yoga & Healing Space, Mother and Child and Gaia Yoga Centre tells us that it is best to spend the first trimester getting used to being pregnant – with meditative and restorative postures.

Carol Chan, yoga instructor at Gaia Yoga Centre, says that in early pregnancy, back-lying positions in prenatal yoga are generally safe. These poses strengthen the back as well. But they are to be avoided in the second trimester. This is because lying on your back puts pressure on a vein that returns blood from the legs to the heart, causing dizziness, shortness of breath and nausea.

In the second trimester, Simmons advises that most postures are achievable but beware of extreme twists of postures that interfere with the abdomen. Postures that carry risk of falling such as headstand, handstands and arm balances should be avoided.

The third trimester should not involve any postures on the stomach, strong backbends and twists. The focus should be on preparing for labour, meditation and relaxation.

HOT ABOUT BIKRAM YOGA

Bikram or hot yoga, is a series of 26 postures with two breathing exercises practised in a room heated to 40°Celsius in 90 minutes. Each posture in the sequence is designed to safely stretch and open the body in preparation for the next posture. The Bikram method is said to stimulate the organs, glands and nerves and systematically move fresh, oxygenated blood to 100 per cent of the body. How is this different from the usual yoga and is it for the expectant mum?

Dr Loke says, "Within reason, the heat exposure can improve blood flow and does provide therapeutic effects." But any yoga exercise should be performed "within the limits of human endurance."

Simmons says that if the mum-to-be finds an increase in flexibility, most of her discomfort is taken away, and most of all, she enjoys the class, then the question of heat would not be an issue. But she cautions, "If there's any posture you don't feel safe in, then the postures are not suitable for pregnancy."

Students at Bikram Yoga

