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# FREEDOM FROM THE INSIDE

a woman's yoga practice guide



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# **Therapeutic Yoga for Women**

Hormones & Pregnancy



## Understanding Your Body

### Female Hormones

*Estrogens* are a group of natural steroid hormones that play a role in how we feel, regulate body temperature, and can delay memory loss. They also increase serotonin and the effects from the endorphins in the brain making us feel good and happy. Estrogen also plays a role in bone health and how we feel before and while menstruating.

*Progesterone* is a hormone that prepares the body for pregnancy and for the fertilized egg to be stable. If we do not become pregnant its level goes down and menstruation begins. High levels of progesterone are believed to contribute to PMS (Premenstrual Syndrome) and mood swings.

### Premenstrual Syndrome (PMS) and Stress

High levels of stress disturb progesterone levels and lower estrogen levels. This can cause severe PMS, mood swings, anxiety, insomnia, depression, and agitation.

Stress has also been shown to make it more difficult to become pregnant. Also, brain and body chemicals that make us calm, focused, and relaxed are lower before and during menstruation.

### How Yoga Can Help

If you have problems with PMS, engaging the parasympathetic nervous system — your body's relaxation response — can be very helpful. Yoga offers us this skill through calming breathing practices. However it is also important to add practices that bring your pulse up slightly.



These could include the practices starting on page 34, dancing, or moving in rhythm with others. These can all increase your energy and elevate your mood.

### How Yoga Reduces Menstrual Pains

Practicing yoga can reduce the pain of menstrual cramps. Think about the areas of your body that typically experience pain from cramping: your belly, pelvis, hips, and lower back. By focusing on certain yoga poses and routines that address these parts of the body you can manage this discomfort. See the special program on page 70. Avoid any poses that do not feel good for you.

## What is Menopause?

Menopause is a natural process and part of every woman's life. It is the time after your menstrual periods have permanently stopped. This usually begins between the ages of 40 and 60 (though it can start as early as age 30, or if there are other changes to the ovaries). Menopause changes how we feel and also creates changes in your body. The speed at which these shifts occur can vary significantly from woman to woman.

### Two Stages of Menopause

Menopause is separated into two stages:

*Premenopause and Postmenopause.*

During premenopause, you feel signs and symptoms of menopause, but menstruation is still continuing. The imbalance of rising and falling hormone levels often cause hot flashes, which make you feel hot and sweaty. During premenopause you can also have irregular periods. The postmenopausal stage is when a woman is about 12 months past her last period and she no longer produces estrogen and progesterone, nor releases eggs.

### How Yoga Can Support Menopause

Entering menopause can create uncomfortable symptoms such as hot flashes, night sweats, sleep problems, weight gain, loss of bone density, and a general feeling of unease and imbalance. These symptoms can become worse when we are feeling stressed or anxious.



A regular, gentle yoga practice can alleviate these symptoms by calming us and reducing our levels of stress. You can practice any of the programs in this book, just proceed at a slow pace, focusing on calming yourself by regulating your breathing in a slow and relaxed manner. The sleep program on page 25 can be practiced to engage the relaxation response.

**If you have osteoporosis (fragile bones), focus on keeping your spine straight in forward folds to avoid pressure on the spine.**

*"I felt completely upside down with my menopause. I started to get hot flashes and couldn't sleep. The gentle yoga helped me relax and sleep better. And the cooling breathing helped me when I started feeling overheated."*

PYP Women's Program Participant

## Sitali - Cooling Breath

Sitali Pranayama (cooling breath) has been helpful for women when they are experiencing hot flashes related to menopause. Sitali is a Sanskrit word meaning “cooling” or “soothing.”

To start, sit comfortably in an easy pose or comfortably in a chair with a straight back. You can tuck your chin in slightly to keep the neck aligned with the rest of your spine.

You can close your eyes if it feels comfortable and inhale and exhale naturally for a few breaths. Then open your mouth and make an ‘O’ shape with your lips. Curl your tongue and project it out slightly from your mouth. Inhale deeply as if you are pulling the air in through a straw — letting the cooling air pass over your tongue and throat. Then draw in your tongue and with the mouth closed, exhale slowly through your nose, releasing the internal warm feeling of your breath.

Repeat as many times as you like. See if you can bring this practice into your daily routine.

If you find it challenging to roll your tongue, you can make the shape of “eee” with your mouth and draw the breath in through closed teeth; this will also create a cooling sensation. As you inhale, draw the breath across your tongue and throat, then exhale through your nose.

Do this practice for as long as you find it comfortable or until you feel that you have cooled down.

**Other beneficial breathing practices during menopause are:** Extended Exhalation on page 28 and Alternate Nostril Breathing on page 61.



## Yoga for Menstrual Pains

This practice combines mindful awareness, conscious breathing, and movement to build a deep connection with your body. It includes poses to release both muscular and mental tension, helping to reduce stress and relax your body.

**1. Opening - Easy Pose & Circles** Sit in a cross-legged position, or on a chair. Allow your spine to lengthen gently toward the ceiling; chest open, shoulders relaxed. Shift your weight slightly forward on your sitting bones to create an arch in the lower back. See if you can relax and breathe down into your belly. Stay for at least 2 minutes. Then start to create large circles with your upper body, rotating it around first in one direction, then switching to the other direction. As you do this, try to keep the muscles of your face and all your joints relaxed — neck, shoulders, elbows, and the wrists.



**2. Side Stretch** Reach your left arm up and over your head and lean your upper body to the right feeling the stretch along your ribcage and arm. Feel your breathing in your left side. Take 5 breaths. Then relax, come back to center, and do the other side.



**3. Cow/Cat** Begin in Cow by moving into the position on an inhalation, allowing the back and spine to arch, tailbone tilted upward, arms straight with wrists under shoulders and knees under hips. Tilt head back and look up between eyebrows. Then as you exhale transition to Cat, rounding the spine and back, drawing the lower belly in toward the spine, tucking the tailbone between the legs, bringing your chin to the collarbone, and looking to the tip of your nose. As your chin comes to your collarbone complete the exhale, expelling all the air from the lungs. Do 10 repetitions, inhaling slowly into Cow and exhaling slowly into Cat.





**4. Resting Pose** With knees wide apart sit back toward your heels. Sink your hips and relax your forehead to the floor or onto your hands. Notice the weight of your body releasing toward the floor as you exhale. Try to relax your belly and muscles of your face. Feel your body breathing. Feel your belly expanding and contracting as you inhale and exhale. Try inhaling through your nose and then exhaling longer with a whispering *haaa* sound (like fogging up a mirror with your breath). Mouth can be open or closed. If it feels OK, stay in this pose for 10 more long exhalations making the sound of *haaa*.



**5. Seated Twist** Hug your knees as close to the chest as possible while keeping your spine long. Take a full inhale and as you exhale twist your upper body to your left. Do not force it, rather move slowly and perhaps more deeply into the twist as you exhale. Notice your ribcage expanding as you inhale and contracting as you exhale. Take 5 full breaths, then slowly release. Repeat to the other side. When complete return to center.



**6. Seated Forward Fold** Hug your knees as close as you can to your chest. Keeping your spine long to feel a lengthening of the lower back, take a full inhale and as you exhale walk your feet forwards and press your belly to the thighs. Relax your neck, the muscles of the face, and belly. Take 10 full breaths feeling into your lower back. Try adding the *haaa* sound as you exhale out your mouth. Then release slowly.



**7. Gentle Backbend** Place the hands behind your back; you can chose if you want to point the fingers forwards or backwards. Lift the chest up gently, keeping your neck long, and breathe into the center of your chest. Take 5 relaxed breaths.



**8. Butterfly Pose** Place the soles of your feet together allowing the knees to fall out to the sides. Rest your chin on your chest and draw your belly in. If you have pain in your knees move your legs forward, but keep them bent. Try to relax your breathing. Feel your inhale moving into your back and belly, then exhale slowly and completely.

Try doing this for 10 breaths. Imagine that you are breathing into the back of your body and exhaling into the ground beneath the floor.

**9. Winding Down - Hamstring Stretch** Lie down on your back, feeling the connection between your back and the floor. You can keep your legs bent as you stretch one leg up trying to hold the back of the leg to feel a stretch at the back of the thigh (hamstring muscle) and calf. Relax your breathing. Feel your inhale moving into your belly, then exhale slowly and completely.

Try doing this for 10 breaths on each leg.



### **10. Reclining Twist**

Lying on your back, bend your right leg (knee over your waist) and move it over to the left. Keep your upper back against the floor and reach your right arm out to the right. You can look up or turn your head to the right.

Take 10 full breaths feeling into your ribcage and chest. Then switch to the other side.

When done, draw your knees into your chest, maybe rocking side-to-side or making small circles with your knees to release tension in your lower back.



### **11. Relaxation/Closing**

Continuing lying on your back; you may bring your feet up onto a chair or your bed to release the lower back. Eyes can be closed if that feels OK. See if you can relax your whole body and feel the weight of it sinking into the place where you are lying, particularly as you exhale. As you relax, just let your body breathe itself without controlling your inhale and exhale. Then, focusing on your exhale, let it be long by breathing out completely. On your next breath, at the end of your exhale, pause briefly before inhaling deeply and repeating four more times. If it feels comfortable, increase your pause at the end of your exhale to a 3 count, and repeat five times. If thoughts arise, see if you can let them go and concentrate on relaxing as you extend your exhale. If for any reason this feels uncomfortable, just relax and let your body breathe how it wants. You can place a thick blanket over your lower belly to keep warm. Stay here as long as you wish.





## Yoga When Pregnant

### How Yoga Can Support You During Pregnancy

Being pregnant can be a turbulent time: your body and hormones are changing you physically, emotionally, and mentally — preparing you for childbirth.

Yoga and mindfulness can be of support by strengthening and releasing muscular tension, improving sleep, lowering blood pressure, relieving constipation, reducing anxiety, and increasing your energy level.

Because of the hormonal changes pregnant women undergo, you can feel very emotional. It is common to have mood swings, become teary for no apparent reason, or feel overly sensitive. Practicing yoga helps to balance your hormone levels, which can help you to feel more emotionally stable and relaxed during this period.

Common discomforts, such as lower back pain, swelling, fatigue, and nausea can often be reduced through yoga.

During the first three months, if you are a beginner and inexperienced with yoga, you should only do a gentle practice or none at all, as the fetus is still implanting and the risk of miscarriage is highest. Practice the following pregnancy program after the initial three months.

### Things to think about

- Avoid any pressure on the belly.
- Avoid any twists.
- When the belly becomes bigger, lie on the left side during relaxation. This is to avoid putting pressure on a large vein that carries blood from the lower half of the body to your heart.
- Don't go too deep into poses or overstretch your ligaments around the joints.