



Labor of Love

Tune in to your body, connect with community, and embrace the birth you're given with prenatal yoga. By Catherine Guthrie

After the birth of her first child, Colleen Millen, 35, knew that she would approach childbirth differently if given another chance. Then a Forrest Yoga teacher in Chicago, Millen stuck to her typical yoga routine throughout her pregnancy. She modified her practice as her belly blossomed, but she shrugged off the prenatal classes at her studio, assuming her years of practicing yoga had bestowed on her the tools for a trouble-free childbirth.

But when the initial pangs of labor brought unrelenting nausea, Millen and her husband raced to the hospital, where her confidence unraveled. Nurses rushed to start intravenous fluids and hook up equipment to monitor the baby's heart rate. Millen was soon on her back, and as the contractions intensified, so did her feelings of helplessness. "I'd practiced yoga for years, but none of that was a comfort when the pain came," she says. After a long, difficult labor, she gave birth to a healthy baby boy, Jacob, but she still feels haunted by the lack of presence she felt during the experience.

Three years later, while planning for baby number two, Millen dived into prenatal yoga. "I cultivated a strong prenatal practice so that when the time came, the movements and breath would kick in instinctually." And that's what happened. When her labor began, Millen focused her attention on a gazing point, relaxed her jaw (to encourage the pelvis to release), and harnessed the power of her breath to

make the most of every contraction. "My preparation helped me surrender to the energy and move with it instead of fighting and struggling against it."

After just 15 minutes of pushing, she and her husband welcomed their daughter, Samantha, into the world. But even if she'd had to face an arduous labor again, Millen believes that her prenatal practice would've helped. Not only did she feel more physically prepared the second time around, but she felt as though her mind and energy were more united throughout the entire birth experience.

Prenatal yoga, the deliberate weaving together of yoga and childbirth preparation, opens the door for women to reclaim their physical, mental, and emotional power and receptivity during the birth process. "Somehow, as women, we think we will automatically know how to give birth," says Gurmukh Kaur Khalsa, co-founder and director of Golden Bridge Yoga in Los Angeles, who has taught prenatal yoga for nearly 30 years. "But we are so detached from our instinctual selves that sometimes we need to be reminded of what we already know."

For a growing number of women, that reminder is prenatal yoga. Expectant mothers in urban centers are flocking to yoga studios that have whimsical names such as Mamaste and Baby Om, while moms-to-be in smaller locales are finding a proliferation of prenatal classes at yoga studios, gyms, and birthing



centers. What's the universal appeal? Prenatal yoga classes offer a place of refuge where women learn to connect with their changing bodies, their babies, and each other. Asana prepares them physically for giving birth, but most women find that the awareness of body, mind, and breath that it teaches is what truly helps them when it's time to deliver. As Rachel Yellin, a prenatal yoga teacher in San Francisco, says, "Doing prenatal yoga doesn't mean you'll have the 'perfect' birth; it means you'll be able to accept the perfection of the birth you're given, regardless of whether it goes according to your plan."

Creating Connection

The community-oriented approach of prenatal yoga took Stephanie Snyder, 35, by surprise. A Vinyasa Yoga teacher in San Francisco, she was accustomed to using her practice as a means to feel connected to others. But the true meaning of oneness didn't fully resonate until she joined her first prenatal class. "When I practice yoga in the company of pregnant women, not only do I feel connected to them, but I feel connected to every woman who has ever been pregnant and any woman who will ever give birth," she says. "That primal connection is empowering, and I know it will help me through the labor and delivery."

Cultivating that bond is a big part of most prenatal classes. Like many of her counterparts, Deb Flashenberg, founder and director of the Prenatal Yoga Center in New York City, encourages the women in her classes to get to know one another. She starts each class by asking students to introduce themselves, give their due date, and share any pregnancy-related aches and pains. The check-in is both an icebreaker and a means of lessening isolation. "I can see the relief register on women's faces when they realize they aren't the only ones with a particular complaint," Flashenberg says. "The sharing of information among new mothers is a wonderful perk of prenatal yoga."

Snyder, pregnant at press time with her first child, often found that her jitters were best soothed by those women in her class who were pregnant for the second or third time. Judith Hanson Lasater, president of the California Yoga Teachers' Association and author of *Yoga for Pregnancy: What Every Mom-to-Be Needs*

to Know, says that prenatal classes provide the space for women to pass down the legacy and wisdom of childbirth. "The way we live now, pregnant women aren't around their family and friends as much." The result? As Lasater explains, "There is very little tribal support anymore for pregnant women." Prenatal yoga can be the answer. Flashenberg notes that many of her students form bonds that last long after they leave the classroom. Connections blossom into friendships, moms' groups form, and their children often become friends. What manifests is a network of support that grows richer as their children grow.

Not Just for Newbies

The community-based atmosphere makes prenatal yoga a magnet for newbies, but even experienced students may find themselves stretching in new directions. Snyder, for instance, has practiced two to three hours of Vinyasa Yoga daily for the past 12 years. Needless to say, she knows her way around a mat, yet she's discovered the value of bringing a beginner's mind to her prenatal yoga class. For the first time, she's actively mellowing out her practice and shifting her focus away from rigorous vinyasa and toward the union of being one with her baby. "It's a great way to literally start making space in your life and in your practice for your baby," she says. "And I get to practice asana that is geared toward the special sensations and vibrations that come with pregnancy." She especially enjoys Savasana (Corpse Pose) at the end of class, when the teacher offers guided visualizations, prompting the women to envision their babies surrounded by love and warmth. "Prenatal yoga is a special bonding time for me and my child in a way that's different from my regular asana practice," Snyder says.

For others, the switch from practicing solo to having a baby on board can be a little bumpier. Releasing the ego can be a challenge for intermediate and advanced practitioners, Flashenberg says. Students may find it hard to accept how pregnancy changes their bodies and how their practice must shift. Some women can continue to practice fairly vigorously. But certain poses should be dialed back or phased out during pregnancy, particularly unsupported inversions, deep twists, prone backbends like Bhujangasana (Cobra



Pose) and Salabhasana (Locust Pose), and strenuous backbends. That means forgoing Sun Salutations with Cobra or Urdhva Mukha Svanasana (Upward Facing Dog) and instead stepping back to simple lunges. Also, certain pranayama techniques should be avoided, such as Kapalabhati Pranayama (Skull Shining Breath) and anything in which you hold the breath, which is called Kumbhaka Pranayama (breath retention).

Attending classes can help you reconsider the temptation to overdo. “Prenatal yoga reminds you it’s not just your body,” Flashenberg says. “You’re sharing it now, which means it’s not the time to push yourself.” She also notes that during pregnancy, the ligaments in your pelvic area and lower back loosen due to an increase in the hormone relaxin, which is thought to help widen the pelvis and facilitate labor. So it’s especially important to avoid overstretching, or you could wind up injured for lack of the usual painful warning signs telling you to stop.

That’s not to say prenatal yoga is for wimps. You won’t master any new Handstand variations and you should avoid jump-throughs, but the level of intensity might surprise you. Classes focus on uncovering hidden sources of stamina, nurturing new ones, and maximizing hip flexibility. To that end, the most strenuous portion of the class is typically the standing segment, during which you can expect to work your edge by holding poses for a minute or longer—the length of an average contraction.

Prenatal teachers knowingly seed their classes with opportunities for students to safely explore and expand their threshold for discomfort. When Amy Zurowski, 32, a prenatal yoga teacher who lives in McMinnville, Oregon, takes her students into Warrior II, for example, she guides them through an imaginary labor. As they hold steady in the pose, thighs working overtime, they imagine themselves breathing through a contraction. Zurowski encourages them to stay present and accept the discomfort by gently reminding them that women have been birthing babies for hundreds of thousands of years. “As you ease out of your pose, perhaps with

tired quads, you are more confident of your innate abilities as a woman and as a mother-to-be,” she says.

Otherwise, classes typically start with gentle warm-ups, graduate to standing and some basic balancing poses, then move to the floor for seated poses. Savasana may be as long as 15 to 20 minutes, giving students time to set up props and sink into deep relaxation. After the first trimester, lying on the back for long periods of time is not recommended since it can slow blood flow to the baby, so blankets and bolsters are used to support students as they lie on their left side to rest.

Don’t Forget to Breathe

Prenatal yoga conditions the mind even more than the body. “The primary benefit of prenatal yoga is breath awareness,” Yellin says. “If you can use the breath as an anchor, it will draw your attention inward and downward, exactly the direction you want your baby to go.”

Yellin gently reminds her students that the breath should always be their primary focus; the physical sensations arising from the asana are secondary. In this way, she explains, they learn to train their focus on the breath during labor and not on the contraction: “Using the breath as an anchor keeps a woman grounded, no matter how overwhelming the sensations might be.”

Monica Paredes, a Kripalu Yoga teacher in Austin, Texas, relied on her breath during the birth of her son, Gabriel. On the taxi ride to the hospital, she took comfort in the vibration of chanting Om. Later, as her labor progressed, she relied on the Ujjayi Pranayama (Victorious Breath) to steady her resolve. Looking back, she says, “My breath and intention were focused on trust and surrender. I dropped into my breath and let everything else go.”

As a Kundalini teacher, Gurmukh Kaur Khalsa encourages her prenatal students to return to the breath as a touchstone during the intensity of labor and childbirth. She uses the mantra Sat nam with the



breath. Loosely translated, it means “Truth is my identity.” Say “sat” on the inhalation and “nam” on the exhalation. The mantra can quell anxiety during pregnancy and childbirth. Gurmukh says, “Added to the breath during pregnancy, it can help you realize that where there is truth, there is no fear, and where there is no fear, there is only love.”

Own Your Birth

The benefits of prenatal yoga can extend well beyond the big moment. Yoga’s time-honored teachings of acceptance and surrender can gently nudge practitioners past a birth that doesn’t go according to plan. Flashenberg likes to remind her prenatal students that birth is like everything else in life: You don’t always get to choose your circumstances, but you can choose how you react to them.

The acceptance she honed in her prenatal yoga class helped Jennifer Coffin, 36, a yoga teacher in Knoxville, Tennessee, come to terms with the birth of her son, Max. She’d set her sights on having a natural birth, but Max had other ideas. Toward the end of her last trimester, an ultrasound revealed the baby was about to enter the world feet first, a breech position often considered too dangerous for vaginal delivery. First, Coffin threw herself into a “fix it” mode, trying to goad him into flipping. She tried therapies from traditional Chinese medicine and practiced gentle inversions. But when he refused to budge, she acquiesced to a cesarean section. “I had to accept the fact that it was the safest option for me and my baby,” she says. She credits her prenatal yoga training with helping her let go of the disappointment. “I would have fallen apart if it weren’t for the mental and emotional strength I had gained from my yoga practice,” she says.

In the end, childbirth, like parenting, comes down to trusting your intuition, feeling what’s right, and not relying on what others think, Lasater says. “That’s what the practice of yoga is all about...being fully, deeply, richly, and radically present with your own self.”

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