

Fertility and Flexibility

Yoga When You're Trying to Conceive

By Debora Geary

*Barbara Shell and her husband tried to conceive for more than two and a half years, with no known fertility issues. They tried fertility drugs and insemination. Then they tried something quite different.

"I started doing Kundalini yoga classes in January, and then my husband started coming with me, too," says Shell of Delano, Minn. "In February, we decided to adopt, and I feel a large part of it was that we were doing yoga together. We were always much more in sync after the classes and much more willing to explore all our options in healthy discussion. We got very excited, picked an agency and started the paperwork. Then, we found out I am pregnant. It's still very early, but this is our first positive test in two and a half years. Amazing." And if that weren't enough good news, Shell is pregnant with twins.

Can yoga really impact fertility? Dr. Alice Domar, researcher at Harvard Medical School, conducted a study that took infertile women (those who had been trying to get pregnant for at least a year) and put some of them into a 10-week mind/body program that included yoga, meditation, nutrition and exercise information and help to change negative thought patterns. Fifty-five percent of participants in this program became pregnant within the next year, compared to 20 percent of women in a control group.

Dr. Domar, who uses this mind/body approach to treat women attending Boston IVF, the biggest infertility treatment center in the country, says that yoga is an invaluable asset in her program and the tool she would least like to lose.

So exactly how does yoga impact fertility?

A Gentler Form of Exercise

Dr. Domar has an interesting theory about one of the ways that some women seem to benefit from yoga. "I believe that vigorous exercise may reduce fertility in some women," she says. "We can't predict whose fertility is exercise sensitive. Yoga is something they can do that will reduce stress without impacting their fertility. For really chronic exercisers, my clinical impression is that at least half that stop get pregnant. Yoga is the best tool I have for these women."

Improved Physical Health

Yoga can also impact the general reproductive health of women trying to conceive. "Yoga tones and strengthens the muscles that support reproductive organs and improves spinal alignment, enabling better circulation and improved

capacity and quality of respiration," says Julie Cade Bon, certified yoga teacher and owner of Partnership for Pregnancy, a company that offers retreats for couples dealing with infertility. She adds that for women who are taking infertility drugs, better breathing can also help the body fight off the toxic effects of those drugs.

Reducing the Physical Effects of Stress

Yoga is perfect for dealing with one of the most pervasive mind/body fertility challenges: stress, often stress caused by the inability to get or stay pregnant. "Women experiencing infertility are often stress- and pain-filled, saddened and angry," says Cade Bon. "These emotions generate chemicals in the body that weaken immunity and make for a less 'hospitable' environment for a new life. Yoga, because of its use of relaxation breathing techniques, combined with the flushing out of physical toxins, provides an antidote to the negative physical impacts of stress, anger and depression."

Feeling Less "Out of Control"

Yoga can also impact a woman's fertility journey at a more psychological level. Kim Biggs of Panama City Beach, Fla., is a typical type A over-achiever, who remains in a perpetual state of disbelief that something she wants so badly and has worked so hard for is still unattainable. She is using yoga during her "sanity break" while getting ready to move ahead with in vitro fertilization (IVF).

"My infertility has made me feel totally out of control for the first time in my life," she says. "Yoga calms me and helps me regain a feeling of control that lasts much longer than the actual amount of time I'm spending on the mat." Biggs really appreciates the tools yoga gives her for controlling her negative thoughts. "Being in control of something at this point in my life is a feeling that is quite addictive," she says.

Strengthening Relationships

It's important that we don't forget that trying to get pregnant takes two. Cade Bon suggests that yoga can also benefit couples. "I have found that yoga, practiced with a partner, can be a wonderful way to shift away from the 'trying to conceive' stress that clouds these relationships..." she says.

Yoga Is Not the Cure-all

This is not to say that yoga is an instant fertility potion, or that it works for everyone. "I've been doing yoga off and on for a few months now and, while I feel better [physically], it has not benefited my infertility struggle," says Stephanie Barone of Flower Mound, Texas.

As someone struggling with unexplained infertility, Barone believes that most women in her shoes are beyond the simple "quick fixes" like yoga. "Really, it's assisted reproductive technology that helps most of us," she says. However, she does appreciate some of yoga's other benefits. "It gives you an hour or so of

quiet time with yourself," she says. "It helps to keep your inner peace, which can be very hard when struggling with infertility."

Where to Start

Try a class, or read a book. "Yoga is more available and accessible than ever in this country – classes are being held in gyms, YMCAs, city recreation centers and yoga studios," says Cade Bon. To get the best initial experience, she recommends finding a class and then using tools such as videos, tapes and books to encourage home practice.

For those who would rather ease in with a book, *Conquering Infertility: Dr. Alice Domar's Mind/Body Guide to Enhancing Fertility and Coping with Infertility* (Viking Books, 2002) is an excellent place to begin.

And you don't need to wait until you have an official diagnosis of infertility to try yoga. It is a tool that can help many women on their path to conception. Cristin Kamantauskas of Syracuse, N.Y., just tried her first yoga class. "I heard about it on my Trying to Conceive With Endometriosis board, and given my situation (endometriosis, blocked tube, prior ectopic pregnancy), I'm willing to try anything that will help."

Kamantauskas' thoughts after the first class echo those of long-time yoga fans. "Some of the positions and stretches were pretty difficult for someone doing this for the first time, but the instructor was great," she says. "Even though it was a workout that required 100 percent mental and physical focus, I walked out feeling like I was on a cloud. I can see how this would have benefits for trying to conceive, because it's good to be this relaxed as opposed to obsessing about every little thing happening with my body."

*Name has been changed to protect privacy. .