

Making Babies: How Yoga Poses May Help With Infertility

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Ten years ago at the end of a yoga class, a young woman walked slowly to the front. She was a little tentative at first, but finally asked if we could talk privately. Even before she spoke, tears welled in her eyes. She wanted to know if there were any poses which could help her with infertility. Her doctor had not found any reason that she could not conceive, but she had been trying for two years with no luck.

While I knew of no studies specifically related to yoga poses and infertility, I told her I was willing to make some suggestions based on my knowledge of the effects of the poses as well as my intuition. I suggested she practice five specific poses (not necessarily the ones given in this article). She was faithful with that practice and became pregnant with twins within two months. While there is no "proof" that these yoga poses helped her to become pregnant, she and I both believe they did. Since that day, I worked with numerous other women who were attempting to become pregnant. I began to wonder if there were actually more and more women in this situation, or whether it was my imagination. Apparently not.

It seems that the most natural thing in the world is not so natural anymore for an increasing number of couples. US couples are estimated to have fertility difficulties at least 15 percent of the time, and those numbers may be under-reported (1).

Infertility rates are definitely on the rise, perhaps due in part to our increased exposure to environmental toxins. While historically infertility was considered to be the "woman's problem", one study has shown that sperm counts in the United States and Europe have dropped enormously in the last 60 years.(2)

Whatever the cause for increasing infertility, more and more couples who are having difficulty conceiving are seeking the help of professionals. These couples and others spend billions in pursuit of pregnancy. In fact, the treatment of infertility is a \$2 billion a year industry in the U.S alone. (3) In 1986, approximately 41 clinics offered in vitro fertilization and related techniques in the United States; by 1996, that number had increased to more than 300. (4)

But in addition to traditional and innovative medical intervention, some people are seeking out the health-enhancing benefits of yoga to help with conception. This seems like a natural fit according to Dr. Rahul Sachdev, a specialist in Reproductive Endocrinology and Infertility at the Robert Wood Johnson Medical School in New Brunswick, New Jersey. He believes that yoga can be helpful, especially for relieving the stress associated with infertility. "Women who are

infertile, especially in the long-term, are extremely stressed out. They show elements of depression as well. One study has shown that the stress levels of an infertile woman are actually equal to those of someone just told that they have HIV, states Dr. Sachdev.

Dr. Sachdev further states that stress can definitely lead to infertility. "What is controversial", he continues, "is can stress relief create fertility?"

And the answer seems to be "yes" for some couples who took part in a program he supervised at St. Peter's Medical Center. This program was based on ongoing programs at the Mind-Body Institute at Harvard University which were created by Herbert Benson, researcher and well-known author on the topic of relaxation. Couples who completed the program with Dr. Sachdev had a 50% fertility rate within one year of finishing the program.

This is considered a "high rate", but what makes it remarkable is that this statistic holds true regardless of the cause of the infertility. In other words, couples who took part in this program centered on stress reduction, including yoga and meditation, as well as emotional support and nutrition, became pregnant within a year regardless of the cause of the infertility. Couples with all types of infertility, even unexplained infertility or low sperm counts, were helped in encouragingly high numbers.

One explanation of why this is so may be that stress increases the blood levels of the hormone epinephrine in the body. A well-documented effect of this hormone is the constriction of blood vessels. Dr. Sachdev suggests the idea that this constriction may also occur in the uterus thus interfering with conception. In a similar vein, yogic texts might suggest that the apana, or the feminine energy we all have centered in the pelvis, must be free to move there for reproduction to occur. Perhaps some yoga poses, especially learning to relax deeply, allow apana to move more freely as well as increase micro-circulation in the reproductive tract.

For four years the yoga teacher for Dr. Sachdev's program was Ellen Saltonstall, a Manhattan-based yoga teacher trained in the Iyengar method and certified in Anusara Yoga. "I focused on poses which opened the pelvis and hip joints, and which were very relaxing, said Ellen recently as we talked over steaming mugs of tea at her studio. "I liked to use restorative yoga poses which I felt allowed the apana, the feminine creative energy of the lower body, to increase. I also gave the students mild inversions like Legs up the Wall Pose to relax them."

Yoga teacher Jeanne-Marie Derrick has taught hundreds women seeking fertility through classes and workshops at her center, the Upper West Side Yoga in New York City. She believes in building up the woman's strength and health, but equally in the importance of increasing the student's ability to soften the organs of the pelvis. In our talk, she specifically mentioned how important it is to "make

space" in the pelvis during the practice of the poses. "The student must be committed", emphasized Jeanne-Marie, an Iyengar trained practitioner, "and be willing to practice at home and come to regular classes. But she also needs to learn to relax and be willing to examine the stresses in her life."

Both of these teachers believe that it is the whole person, male or female, who must be addressed, not just the issue of stress. In other words, improving the individual's general health will increase their fertility. Therefore attention must be paid to one's nutrition, environment, to the amount of sleep one is getting, as well as one's relationships and attitudes. There is no simple answer to the challenge of fertility. But it is becoming increasingly clear that yoga practice, especially a focus on relaxation and softening the belly, may be an important part of the puzzle.

Traditionally yoga poses were used to decrease the sexual energy of its practitioners. It was believed that one could transform sexual energy so that it was more available for self-realization. Today, however, pragmatic Americans are using the practices of yoga asanas to increase the chances of pregnancy.

The poses offered below can help. They are suggested to cause an increase in the apana energy in the pelvis as well as to teach you to soften this area. They are also suggested to reduce stress and effect the entire endocrine system in what is believed to be a beneficial way. Please practice these poses with the knowledge of your health care professional and with the support of an experienced yoga teacher.

Poses Which Can Help

1. Basic Relaxation Pose (savasana)

If you have to choose only one pose to practice to reduce your stress levels and increase the chances of conception, this is the one. Practice it every day for at least 20 minutes. I suggest that both partners practice the pose regardless of the diagnosis.

Try to find an area which is quiet and not near a phone. You will need the following props: a small pillow or folded blanket to support your head and neck, a large couch cushion or yoga bolster for the back of your knees, a smaller pillow for the back of your ankles, a yoga eye bag or a face cloth to cover your eyes. If you tend to get cold easily, you may want to have another blanket to spread over yourself for warmth.

To practice this pose, use a carpeted area or lie on your yoga mat, or use both. Begin by sitting on the floor; put the couch cushion under your knees and one of the smaller pillows under the back of your ankles. Lying back carefully, place the

folded blanket or of small pillow under your neck so that it supports the whole neck and touches the top of the shoulders.

Remove your watch, your glasses and loosen your belt buckle if necessary. Cover your eyes with the eye bag or cloth. Be sure not to cover your nose in any way. If you are wearing contacts, remove them if possible; otherwise just use the eye cover over your forehead. Basic Relaxation Pose is intended to feel completely comfortable and supported. If it does not, adjust your props.

Pay attention to your breath. Inhale a long and slow breath, follow with an equal and long exhalation; do not strain in any way. Continue this practice for 5 to ten breaths, and then allow your breath to assume its own natural rhythms but keep your attention lightly on it.

Let your jaw loosen and your body melt into the floor. You may want to pay special attention to your belly and entire pelvic region. When you inhale imagine that your belly is soft and infused with energy; when you exhale imagine that all impediments to conception are leaving with that breath.

Notice the tendency of your mind to jump around, especially to run toward the future and to all the tasks you may remember that you have yet to accomplish. This jumping nature of the mind both creates stressful reactions in your body and is itself the expression of your stressful state. When your mind does this "jumping", simply bring your attention back to your breath and start from there, over and over again. If possible, find the space to just let yourself lie there and be.

To come out of Basic Relaxation Pose, bend one knee and roll over to your side. Lie there for a few breaths before using your arms to help you get up slowly. Take care as you resume the activities of your day.

Basic Relaxation Pose is the best ways there is to relieve stress and fatigue. It reduces blood pressure and improves other indices of stress. Practice it every day without fail for the rest of your life. It will improve your ability to parent.

2. Supported Bridge Pose (supported setu bandhasana)

The intention of this pose is to open and soften your belly; the elevated position of the pelvis will be gently stimulating to the apana energy.

This pose is not recommended for menstruating women. If you feel discomfort in your lower back while in the pose, roll gently to your side, sit up slowly, lower the height of the props and try it again.

Supported Bridge Pose requires large flat couch or chair cushion, about six inches high, or two firmly folded blankets placed one on top of the other to

create a six inch lift. You will also need adequate space to lie down on a comfortable floor and of course, your eye bag or other eye cover.

Begin by placing the cushion or blankets on the floor. Sit on one end of the props and lie back so that your shoulders hang off the end of the props and lightly touch the floor. It is important that your neck is not pressing down on the floor. Rather, the outer shoulders and upper arms are resting on the floor to support your body. You should be able to slide your fingers into the space under the base of your neck with no trouble. If you cannot, move onto the props slightly until you can.

In the final pose, your head rests on the floor so that your face is parallel to the ceiling. Bend your knees carefully one by one, and put your feet on the floor. Place your arms out to the side in a comfortable position. Make sure that your tailbone is very slightly pressing down so that your navel is a little higher than your tailbone rather than the opposite.

Place your eye cover over your eyes; breathe soft and normal breaths. You may want to stay in this pose for as long as five minutes; it should be comfortable enough to do so. Remember that if the pose is not that comfortable, you are encouraged to lower the height of your props. To come out when the pose is over, roll carefully to one side, using your arms to help you slowly come to a sitting position.

3. Elevated Legs up the Wall Pose (viparita karani)

Elevated Legs up the Wall Pose is very relaxing and soothing; it reduces blood pressure and quiets the mind. It also opens the pelvis and may help regulate the thyroid and other endocrine glands. It is especially useful at reducing fatigue from long periods of standing.

There are a few contraindications to practicing this pose, however. If you suffer from hiatal hernia, glaucoma, detached retina, or are menstruating, do not practice this pose. Check with your health care professional if you have any concern about inverting your body.

For props, all you will need is a sturdy and empty wall (sometimes a closed door is the best bet) and three folded blankets. Place your yoga mat near the wall so that the narrow end is next to the baseboard. Then put two of the blankets on top of each other about 10 inches from the wall. The blankets should be folded into a shape approximately 18 inches by 14 inches. Fold the other blanket so it is long and skinny, about two feet long by six to eight inches wide. Put the last blanket against the other two to form a shape of the letter "T".

Sit on the edge of the higher blankets which is nearest the wall with your left shoulder facing the wall. With an exhalation, roll back and swing your legs up the

wall and lie back. Your pelvis is now resting on the high blankets so that your tailbone is hanging over the edge near the wall and your last rib in the back is just at the front edge of the blankets. The long blanket is supporting your spine, shoulders, neck and head. Coming into this pose may take a bit of practice, so give yourself the chance to try it a couple of times if you do not get it the first time.

When you are just learning the pose, try to stay there for at least two to three minutes. Once you are more familiar with the pose, try staying longer, even up to 15 minutes. To come out, bend your knees halfway toward your chest and roll to the side, using your arms to sit up carefully.

Remember that this pose is not about stretching the back of your legs, so move your set up away from the wall until your legs feel comfortable with your tailbone hanging slightly over the edge of the blankets near the wall.

4. Supported Wide Angle Pose (supported upavistha konasana)

This is an especially important pose for women; it is believed to effect the uterus in a positive way. Whether or not it does, it is a relaxing pose for your back and for your mind as well, two great sources of stress.

To practice Supported Wide-Angle Pose, you will need a comfortable sitting surface, a sturdy chair and possibly a folded blanket. Begin by sitting down on the floor so that you are facing the seat of the chair with your legs wide apart.

Do not force your legs to open too widely. Remember that this practice is about doing less, not challenging yourself to reach your edge. You want to be able to focus on the relaxing aspects of the pose instead of on the stretching aspects. Bring your legs a little closer together than you know you are able to open them. This will be a reminder that your yoga practice is about slowing down, doing less and allowing yourself to rest instead of practicing with the stress-inducing attitude of more, more, more.

Fold your arms at the elbows, lean forward onto the chair, and rest your forehead on your arms. If you feel mild discomfort in your lower back, this can often be relieved by sitting on a firm, folded blanket so your pelvis is elevated. Remember that you are to be tilting slightly forward toward the chair, not dropping down toward it. Manipulate the blanket height so you feel comfortable.

Keep your eyes closed and breathe normally. It is important to make sure that your neck is long, and not sagging down in the middle. You may want to experiment with tucking your chin slightly inward toward your chest. After one minute come up and reverse the criss-cross of your arms, then repeat the pose for another minute before coming up and practicing the next pose.

5. Supported Bound Angle Pose (supported baddha konasana)

When you take the time and trouble to set yourself up in this pose, you will not believe how relaxed and supported you feel. This pose gives special attention to the relaxation of your belly.

While this pose is definitely prop intensive, it is well-worth it. I have had students who have gently refused to come out of this pose, even after 20 minutes.

To practice Supported Bound Angle, you will need your non-skid mat, a firm couch cushion., a couple of thick books, two firmly rolled blankets, a smaller blanket or pillow, a yoga belt and a yoga eye bag or cloth to cover your eyes. If you choose the option of supporting your arms, you will need two additional pillows or blankets. Be sure to find a place to practice where you will not be disturbed and which has a comfortable floor surface

Stack the books on one end of your non-skid mat and place the firm couch cushion on top of the stack so that it is resting at a 45-degree angle. Sit with your hips snugly against the cushion. Then bend your knees, put the soles of your feet together and let your knees fall out to the side into Bound Angle Pose.

While you are still sitting up, connect the belt into the biggest circle you can. Place the belt behind you so that it fits snugly down over your lower back as close to your hips as possible and comfortable. Then stretch the belt out on the inside of your thighs so that it reaches over the outside of your feet. Adjust the length of the belt so that it is gently holding your feet in place. Be careful not to bring the heels too close into the body; remember that this is not a challenging practice but a restorative one.

Place a firmly rolled blanket under the outside of each of your upper thighs near your hip joints to give support to the length of your leg. This is even more important to do if you are flexible and your knees drop down to the floor easily. Remember, this pose is not about stretching, it is about opening. By supporting your thighs, you will actually allow your legs to relax more deeply. If you like, place the props under your forearms now to support them comfortably.

Lie back and place the small pillow or blanket under your head, and cover your eyes with the face cloth. Remain in the pose for at least three minutes, or as long as 20 minutes. This is an especially nice pose in which to use long soft breathing. Try this for a few minutes and then give yourself up to the complete letting go of the pose.

To come out, bring your knees together, slip off the belt and roll to one side. Lie there for several breaths and then get up by using your arms for support.

In texts on Samkhya-yoga, one can find the concept "hiranyagarbha". This means the "great golden womb of the Universe in which we all exist". I like to think that when one practices Supported Bound Angle one's body recreates and evokes this "great golden womb" and its energy. (AUTHOR'S NOTE: DO YOU WANT A SPECIFIC CITE FOR THIS REFERENCE?).

6. Seated Meditation

Bringing the lessons of relaxation to almost any situation is the ultimate form of stress reduction. Use this practice whenever you are waiting for something during your day. Be creative and find all the "wasted" minutes when you can create a moment of health and stress reduction for yourself.

To practice, sit as comfortably as you can with your arms supported at your side or in your lap, your feet on the ground and your spine easily erect. If possible, close your eyes. If this is not possible, then lower them so that they fall about three feet in front of you and soften your gaze.

Let go of your shoulders and your jaw muscles. As you begin to slow down and relax remember that learning to be present with yourself and your feelings, whatever they may be, is a powerfully liberating tool to help you de-stress.

Pay attention to your breath and what movements it creates in your body. Allow your breath to move without direction. As you begin to relax, you will notice that your belly is soft, as is your face, jaw and focus. You may notice that your mind alternates from thinking about the future to coming back to the present to wandering off to the past. Whatever your mind does, as soon as you notice its activity, focus on a sensation of this very moment. That will ground you in the "now" and settle you into your body.

When this practice becomes a part of your life, you will be able to "check in "with your body throughout the day, noticing any messages of stress it is sending from tight shoulders, jaw, throat or belly.

As you continue begin to allow your attention to expand to include not only your body but also your surrounding environment. Really hear the sounds around you; feel the temperature and pressure of the air on your skin; notice everything without thinking about it. Weave all these impressions into this present moment.

Sit quietly for five to 15 minutes, maintaining this awareness of yourself and your world. To come out, take a deep breath, slowly lift your head and go on with your day.

Author's Note:

I would like to offer a few book bibliography AS WELL AS how people can contact the yoga teachers in this article. Does that meet your needs? If so, I will email it to you directly.

(1) The Whole Person Fertility Program: a revolutionary mind-body process to help you conceive by Niravi B. Payne, MS, and Brenda Lane Richardson. New York City, New York: Three Rivers Press, 1997, p. 17.

(2) Knight-Ridder/Tribune News Service, November 23, 1997, p.1123.

(3) HealthFacts, "Infertility Treatments: Weighing the Risks and Benefit". February, 1999, p. 1.

(4) Family Planning Perspectives, "Use of Infertility Services in the United States, 1995", by Elizabeth Hervey Stephen and Anjani Chandra, May 2000, volume 32, issue 13, p132.

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