

Women and Hatha Yoga

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La femme et le yoga

Discussion sur les avantages du yoga pour la femme.

Before starting a discussion on the benefits of yoga exercise for women, it's necessary to draw a distinction between yoga and Hatha yoga. Definitions of yoga vary depending on the teacher, but in general terms it's agreed that yoga is a science, a way of life whose goal is to unite the individual and cosmic selves. Hatha yoga is only one school, the physical school, in this system.

I was initially disturbed by the science of yoga because of a quote in the brochure of our local yoga institute. 'Instead of trying to make the outside more suitable,' it says, 'the yoga practitioner changes his attitude toward it.' This sounded dangerously like what women have been doing for centuries, often with disastrous results.

Hatha yoga can be invaluable to all women, however, including those trying to change the outside world. Its very lack of competitiveness can be a revitalizing release in a pressure-filled, aggressive society. I have personally found the philosophy in *Our Bodies, Ourselves* to be most helpful:

'We are not suggesting exercise as a cure-all, as a substitute for changing this oppressive society into a human one we can live in, but we are saying that we need it to relieve the harmful effects of all the frustrations, anxiety and anger we experience daily.'¹

Hatha yoga is a system of physical culture developed long ago in India as an aid to the yoga of meditation. Yogis had as their aim not to build large muscles, but to attain constitutional health, long life, and a slim, relaxed and flexible body capable of sustained effort and great endurance.

The benefits of Hatha yoga are many. The postures or asanas tone up the musculature and the endocrine and nervous systems, make the backbone flexible, strengthen the back muscles, and calm the mind by relaxing the body. Slow and rhythmic breathing acquired through yoga practice slows down the heart and improves the functioning of the cardiovascular system.

Yogis recognized that our lungs need specialized exercise and conditioning and many of their postures are chest and abdominal movements. (Even people who haven't studied yoga know instinctively the value of taking a deep breath when

entering a stressful situation.) It is also claimed that conditioned movements of the diaphragm and the abdominal muscles help women to ensure healthy periods and to facilitate natural childbirth.

This brings us to a thorny problem—yoga and the female reproductive system. Does yoga really relieve menstrual cramps? The general advice, it seems, is to discontinue yoga practice during menstruation because of the discomfort it may cause. Many women find this overly cautious, however, and there is a quote in *The Modern Yoga Handbook* by Vijay Hassin: 'All I can say is not having a woman's body, I would not know; try for yourself and see.'² Bravo.

Certain of the yoga postures are designed specifically for the pregnant woman and should be begun in the fourth month by those who have not previously been practising yoga. Many of these exercises may be familiar from childbirth books or prenatal classes including squatting to strengthen the legs and perineum for delivery, the pelvic rock (arching the back and inverting), leg raises, and the pubococcygius muscle toner (the infamous Kegel exercise!). All should be done in a slow, meditative way with deep breaths between postures. It is interesting to note that the deep relaxation techniques of yoga are almost identical to those of the Lamaze method of natural childbirth.

Most women also agree that yoga stretchings and breathings not only provide immediate relief from tension, but also release energy and make the body and mind dynamic. You may remember some of the simpler postures from your high school gym class, such as the shoulderstand, the headstand, the head-knee posture, the trunk twist, and the side bend.

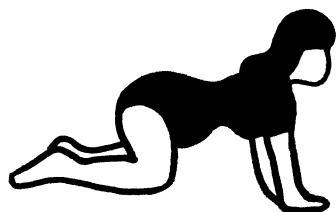
Other guidelines of the Hatha yoga system can also benefit your health should you decide to adopt them. These include no alcohol or cigarettes, eating in moderation, periodic fasting, limiting meat consumption, and keeping to fresh, simple food.

Women wishing to study Hatha yoga can usually find a course offered through a YWCA, community college, or church group. Those interested in yoga as a way of life, however, will probably find it necessary to enroll in a yoga institute, or else study under a special teacher or guru.

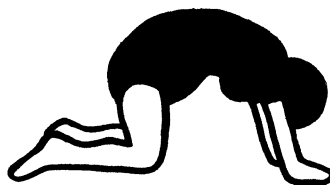
Footnotes:

- 1 The Boston Women's Health Book Collective, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1976), p. 115.
- 2 Vijay Hassin, *The Modern Yoga Handbook* (Doubleday & Company Inc., New York, 1978), p. 52.

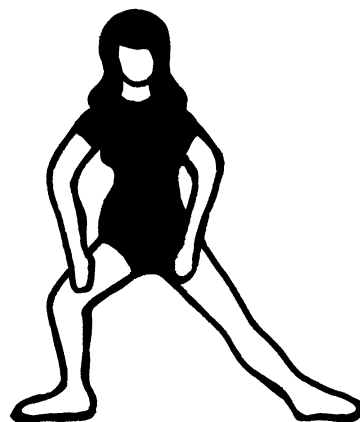
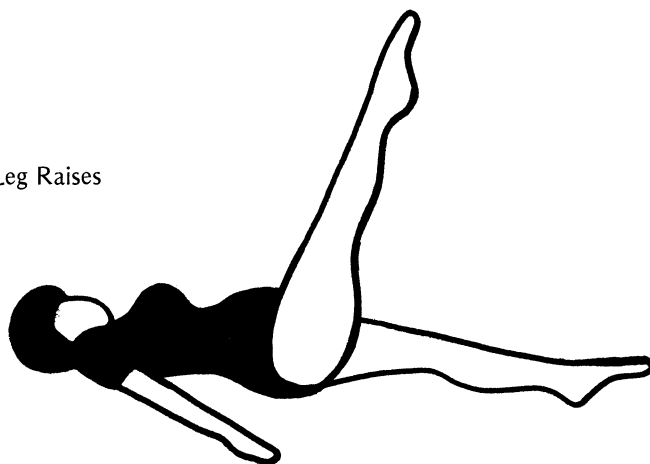
Yoga Exercises Beneficial During Pregnancy



Pelvic Rock



Leg Raises



Inner-Thigh Stretch