

Ladies, this way, please!

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Yoga Practice for Women

Scientists are discovering more and more how our biochemistry affects us, influencing not just the functions of the body but our mentality - temperament, emotions, moods, aptitudes and patterns of thought.

Yet, strangely, as our understanding of natural processes grows we are removing ourselves increasingly from natural ways of being and acting. We drive or ride instead of walk, sit on chairs instead of cross-legged, stoop instead of stand straight, give birth in beds instead of squatting. Thanks to artificial light and urban schedules we no longer follow our circadian rhythms of waking, sleeping and mealtimes. Our foods are treated and adulterated with chemicals, to the detriment of their intrinsic wholesomeness that nourishes our biochemistry. Squeezed from these two ends - unnatural behaviour and unnatural food - we are becoming desensitised to our bodies.

Just as loss of order and sense of purpose in a society or individual may have disturbing consequences (anomie), so too in this situation where, although living in our bodies, we are, as it were, exiled from them. The problem may go unnoticed for some time, but in the end it is likely to surface. We are already seeing the effects of stressful, artificial living in the rise of such modern scourges as cancer, heart disease, auto-immune problems and, most tellingly, psychological illness.

For women, whose physiology is particularly sensitive to periodic cycles and who are intimately concerned with birth and nurturing, being out of tune with the body may have a particularly displacing effect. And as women are central to the emotional wellbeing of children and family life such an effect may be far-reaching. It is therefore vitally important for them - even more than for men - to be attuned to their physicality.

Whatever the actual stage of life - puberty, sexual maturity, menopause - or fecundity status - childless, pregnant, or nursing mother - women's bodies beat to the same biorhythms.

Yoga practice can help one to be in harmony with these biorhythms. In the process of improving general health and strength, it helps to tone the female organs, to balance the hormonal system and to nourish the nerves. More than that, intelligent practice takes account of the periodic physiological changes of menstruation, and the situational changes of pregnancy and menopause. Yoga routines need to be modified drastically during pregnancy and to be tailored to each individual mother-to-be and her ever-changing body, and therefore the guidelines for practice at this time are beyond the scope of this article.

It is the poses that bring emotional steadiness and hormonal balance that need to form the core of a woman's practice, to act as a ballast for the constant changes her body is subjected to. This is not to say that other types of poses should not be done - of course they should. Women benefit from strength, stamina, flexibility, stimulation, exhilaration and calm just the same as men. And of course men gain advantage from quietness and emotional fortitude just as much as women. Nevertheless, different general characteristics are observable between the sexes even while individuals may vary from the common pattern. But as the background thrum of chords and beats supports the movement of a melody, so a base of quiet, steadying poses anchors hormonal fluctuations and prevents them from becoming disturbing.

The poses that give this base are supine poses, inverted poses and forward bends.

Accordingly, this article introduces some of these postures, as well as others which are particularly beneficial for the pelvic area, in a simple routine that can be enjoyed by all, including beginners. With time and practice, other poses can be introduced. This routine is especially helpful during menstruation, though at this time the inverted poses should be omitted.

Matsyasana (Fish Pose) ([Yoga Explained](#) p. 73)

In this posture breathing is enhanced because the chest expands as a result of being supported. At the same time tension in the abdomen is reduced owing to the cross-legged position where the legs rest and there is no pull on the lower trunk.

Sit on the floor with the legs simply crossed, with a bolster or folded blankets behind you. Lean back and lie down so that the spine is supported on the bolster. Place a folded blanket or firm cushion under the head. Keep the arms beside the trunk with the hands relaxed. Breathe normally and relax.

Stay for 2-3 minutes, then come up, change the cross of the legs and repeat.

Supta-Baddhakonasana (Supine Bound-Angle Pose) ([Yoga Explained](#) p.74, Help Box)

In this supremely relaxing pose the outwardly flexed legs and extended groins make the abdomen wide so that it becomes soft and spacious instead of compressed; this encourages a healthy blood supply to the abdominal organs and alleviates menstrual cramps.

Sit close to a wall, facing it. Have a bolster or folded blankets behind you. Bend the knees outwards and bring the soles of the feet together. Curl the toes back and press them against the wall. Lie back on the bolster and place a folded blanket under the head. Keep the arms beside the trunk. Breathe normally and relax.

Stay for 2-5 minutes, then come up.

Adho-Mukha-Virasana (Hero Pose with Head Down) (*Yoga Explained* p.138)
Bending forward relaxes the back, neck and internal organs as they do not have to be carried upright against gravity. Thus the nerves also become soothed. Resting the head on a support makes the mind quiet as the front of the brain is pressed gently by the support, calming any over-activity. This is akin to the action of a bandage which supports and soothes at the same time. Forward bends are very effective in alleviating the hot flushes of menopause.

Sit on the heels with a bolster or folded blanket in front of you. Spread the knees slightly apart. Bend down and rest the forehead and arms on the bolster.

Stay for 2-3 minutes, then come up.

Adho-Mukha-Sukhasana (Comfortable Pose with Head Down)
(*Yoga Explained* p.76)

Relieving the body of the need to lift against gravity by doing a series of forward bends deepens relaxation.

Sit in simple cross-legs on one or two folded blankets with a stool or chair in front of you. Bend forward and rest the forehead and arms on the stool.

Stay for 2-3 minutes, then come up. Change the cross of the legs and repeat.

Janushirshasana (Head-to-Knee Pose) (*Yoga Explained* p.139)

In all forward bends the stomach and abdomen become tension-free. This is of great benefit to the female organs.

Sit on the floor on one or two folded blankets with a stool or chair in front of you. Stretch the legs out under the stool. Bend the right leg out to the side, while keeping the left leg straight. Bend forward and rest the forehead and arms on the stool.

Stay for 1-2 minutes, then come up. Straighten the right leg, bend the left leg to the side and repeat.

Paschimottanasana (Intense Posterior Stretch) (*Yoga Explained* p.141)

It is easier to bend forward when the legs are flexed. The next step is to do so when the legs are straight; the same benefit of thorough relaxation is continued.

Sit on the floor on one or two folded blankets with a stool or chair in front of you. Stretch the legs out under the stool and keep them straight. Bend forward and rest the forehead and arms on the stool.

Stay for 1-3 minutes, then come up.

Baddhakonasana (Bound-Angle Pose) (*Yoga Explained* p.107)

As in the supine version of this posture, the groins extend and open the pelvic region. The outwardly flexed legs support the pelvic organs in such a way as

to make them lift and extend. Thus it is good to do this pose during menstruation as it helps not only to ease the flow but to relieve the feeling of heaviness in the legs and back.

Sit on a bolster or one or two folded blankets, optionally against the wall. Bend the knees to the sides. Bring the feet together with the soles touching, and move them towards the body. Place the hands on the bolster beside the hips. Stretch the trunk up and open the chest. Breathe normally.

Stay for 1-2 minutes, then release the legs.

Sarvangasana (Shoulder Stand or Entire Body Pose) (*Yoga Explained* pp. 93-94 - 3 pics)

Inverting the body revitalises one's entire being: it removes physical fatigue, such as of the legs and back; it nourishes the organs and physiological systems by promoting healthy blood circulation; and it refreshes the mind, giving it, literally, a different perspective. The stomach and diaphragm area remain soft and therefore without tension. This allows peace and calm to pervade both body and mind. This posture is also particularly beneficial for the throat and thyroid and thus on the hormonal system.

Prepare a set of four or five folded blankets, with the folded edges neatly together. The height should be 2-3 inches, the width sufficient for the shoulders and the depth enough to accommodate the length of the upper arms. (If the elbows slip apart, tie a belt around the upper arms just above the elbows.)

Lie down with the shoulders on the blankets, 2-3 inches away from the edge, and the head on the floor. Check that you are in a straight line. Flex the knees and bring the feet towards the buttocks. (pic. 1)

Bend the knees over the abdomen and swing the legs and trunk up. Immediately support the back with the hands. Lift the trunk higher, bring the chest forwards and the elbows in. (pic 4)

Straighten the legs up. Move the hands further towards the shoulder blades to give you maximum lift and support. (pic.5)

Stay for 2-5 minutes. Bend the legs and slide down.

CAUTIONS

Do not do this pose (or any inverted pose) during menstruation, as this interferes with the exit of waste material from the body.

If you experience pressure in the head, eyes, ears or throat, come down. Re-position the body and try again. If the pressure persists, come down and seek the advice of a teacher.

Ardha-Halasanana (Half Plough Pose) (*Yoga Explained* p.95)

As in *Sarvangasana* above, and for the same reasons, this pose restores the body and mind to balance after stress or exertion.

Place a stool over the head before you go up into *Sarvangasana* (see above). From *Sarvangasana* take the legs down on to the chair so that the thighs are supported. Take the arms over the head and relax.

Stay for 1-3 minutes. Bend the knees and ease yourself off the stool, pushing it away with the hands. Slide down.

CAUTIONS

See *Sarvangasana* above.

Setubandha-Sarvangasana (Shoulder Stand Bridge) (*Yoga Explained* p.77)
The overall benefits of this pose as for *Sarvangasana* and *Ardha-Halasana* above. Its particular speciality is that the front of the body is gently extended, creating space for the pelvic organs. This de-compression helps to alleviate menstrual cramps.

Sit on a bolster placed sideways on the floor. Slide slightly back so that the lower back is nearly off the bolster. Holding the bolster, lie back so that the shoulders and head are on the floor and the lower back is well supported. Relax the legs. Take the arms over the head and relax.

Stay for 3-5 minutes. To come down, bend the knees, push the bolster away and slide back. Stay with the knees bent and lower back on the floor for a while. Turn to the side to get up.

Shavasana (Corpse Pose) (*Yoga Explained* p.79)

Lying still in a state of relaxation is an art that helps to quieten the mind. In this peacefulness the stresses of daily living are counteracted, so that both body and mind find renewal. Conscious relaxation enhances the natural processes of regeneration that take place during sleep.

Place a bolster or two narrowly folded blankets lengthwise on the floor. Sit in front of the bolster and hold it against your back. Lean back and lie down on it. Place a folded blanket under the head. Press the shoulders down and away from the neck. Lengthen the back of the head away from the shoulders. Stretch the arms and legs away from the trunk and then relax them. Turn the palms upwards and relax the hands. Extend the feet, then let them drop to the sides. Close the eyes. Breathe quietly.

Stay for 5-10 minutes. Slowly open the eyes, bend the knees, turn to the side and get up from the side.