

Yoga for the Nursing Mama

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The most important thing to remember about postpartum yoga is that your life is radically different now, and you should let go of any guilty feelings about not doing an hour of yoga poses every day. Right now your *dharma* or duty, is to take care of your newborn. So every time you nurse your child or change a diaper, you are doing your yoga. It just looks different from standing on your head or balancing on one foot.

While there are several post-partum training aspects common for all women, there are some body mechanics unique to nursing mothers. All post-partum women can regain strength in their abdominals muscles and pelvic floor through crunch exercises and Kegel exercises. Re-establishing postural alignment is also critical—opening the chest so the upper back does not round and engaging the abdominal muscles so the lower back does not arch. Beyond that, nursing mothers have some particular needs because of the physical demands of nursing, mainly the sustained position we hold for great lengths of time, especially in the first several weeks. I have focused on the particular needs of nursing mothers in this handout.

The last thing to remember is to honor that your body has just been through a lot. It is critical that you get clearance from your primary care provider before resuming any physical activity. I have noted in this handout the poses that I believe require special clearance from your care provider, but talk to them first about any of the poses because every birth is different, and everyone has their own unique recovery process.

That said, let's jump in.

Breathing

Breathing exercises help tremendously in the postpartum period. There will be numerous moments in both the newborn stage and beyond when you will really need to stop and take a deep breath. You can also practice breathing exercises while nursing, which can help make nursing more enjoyable and relaxing as well.

Victorious Breath (*Ujayi Pranayama*)

This breath, called *ujayi pranayama* is a simple, restorative, and energizing breath. Inhale and exhale through your nose using a soft constriction at the back of the throat on the exhaling part. The breath should sound like a gently, whispering snore. Or, as many modern teachers say, it sounds like Darth Vader. You can also use the constriction on the inhale as well—many teachers will debate this. As you inhale, feel your chest rise and fall and allow the breath to softly expand your abdomen.

Important note: Do not force the abdomen to expand, especially if you have diastasis recti—a separation of the right and left halves of the rectus abdominus muscle—resulting from your pregnancy.

The philosophy behind the slight constriction in the exhale is that you are retaining some of the energizing aspects of the breath in the body while you release the air. I see it that the soft sound you make helps you focus tremendously on the breathing and helps drown out other distractions both external—like your neighbor’s stereo—and internal—like those nagging doubts about your mothering capabilities most of us face too often in the early days.

Alternate Nostril Breath (*Suryabheda Pranayama*)

This breath you can also do while nursing, but you will need a free hand. This breathing technique can rejuvenate the body. Many believe it helps balance the right side and left side of the brain. In yoga, nostrils and breath are considered linked to energy channels and heat: the right side is considered an upward channel that heats the body and the left side is considered a downward channel that cools the body. Physically, we consider this a wonderful way to open up your sinuses, particularly if you practice this while taking a precious hot shower. You can also practice this breath while nursing, if you have one hand free.

1. Take your right thumb and block off your right nostril
2. Inhale through your left nostril
3. Take your right ring or pinky finger and block off your left nostril
4. Open your right nostril and exhale through your right nostril
5. Inhale through your right nostril
6. Take your right thumb and block off your right nostril
7. Open your left nostril
8. Exhale through your left nostril
9. Inhale through your left nostril and repeat the cycle several times

Poses

There are lots of misconceptions regarding how much yoga one needs to do for benefit. Originally, yoga was a monastic pursuit and men would dedicate their entire lives to practicing poses, breathing exercises, meditation, etc. However, in the past 50 years, ever since Richard Nixon invited a yoga teacher from India to permanently live in the US, the practice has broadened its scope to provide therapeutic benefits to many groups of people. I believe you should practice yoga poses as often as you can realistically without adding any stress to your life: if that means squeezing in five minutes a day, great, if that means doing a full hour once a week, great.

The guidelines for what most consider a “complete” yoga practice are very simple. Yoga practices strive towards balance, both on a philosophical plane and a physical plane. A balanced yoga pose practice works all sides of the body more or less equally. In structuring a yoga class, teachers focus on balancing the directional movement of the spine. If you can remember to do the following things, you have a well-balanced yoga pose practice:

- Bend forward
- Bend backward
- Twist side to side
- Bend side to side

Here are some of the poses I found particularly helpful in my postpartum period. I have also included partner poses, because it's critical to connect with your partner, especially when the all-night baby party has you frazzled.

Downward Facing Dog (*Adho Mukha Svavasana*)

1. Begin with your hands and knees onto the floor.
2. Keep your fingers spread wide and middle finger pointing forward.
3. Walk your knees back several inches behind your hips.
4. Curling the toes on the floor, lift your hips high up in the air and presses your hips back.
5. Keeping the knees slightly bent, press your heels toward the floor.
6. Let your ears hang between his upper arms, and spreads the shoulders away from the spine, coming into a solo Downward Facing Dog pose.

Pose Benefits: Downward Facing Dog is one of the most frequently performed poses in yoga because it works so many areas of the body. It provides traction for the entire spine, lengthening from head to tail. Many people consider this pose the best stretch for the back. The chest and shoulders open in Downward Facing Dog while the triceps of the upper arms and muscles surrounding the shoulder joint gain strength. This pose also provides a good opening for the hamstrings.

Important note: Wait until you have gotten clearance from your primary care provider before doing this pose.



Triangle (*Trikonasana*)

1. Begin standing with your feet out wide; stretching the arms straight out to the sides, the ankles should line up just below the wrists.
2. Turn both sets of toes to your right, with your right foot forming a 90-degree angle to your torso and the left foot turning slightly to the right.
3. Stretch your right hand as far to the right as you can, shifting your hips back to the left.
4. Keep both the left and right sides of your torso stretched as you reach your right hand down to touch your thigh or your shin. Your right knee can bend slightly, but your left knee should stay straight.
5. The body should not twist as you do this—a great way to keep your alignment is to practice with your back and feet against a wall and keep both shoulders, both hips, and the back of your head against the wall.

Pose Benefits: Triangle stretches some deep back muscles, specifically the quadratus lumborum, which tightens and often cramps after prolonged sitting. This pose also provides a gentle stretch for the hamstring muscles in the back of the thigh, which also tighten with prolonged sitting.

Important note: Wait until you have gotten clearance from your primary care provider before doing this pose.



Boat(*Navasana*)

1. Begin sitting.
2. Draw your knees together and grab the backs of your thighs.
3. Lift your chest and focus on lengthening the spine.
4. Lift your feet an inch or two off the floor, keeping the knees bent at first. Begin to lift the feet and straighten the knees, as long as you can do so without rounding the back.
5. Keep your hands on the floor, or grab the back of the calves, or reach your arms out to the side. Find the hand placement that allows you to hold the pose for several breaths without rounding the spine.
6. You can also balance your baby against your thighs or against your chest in this pose.

Pose Benefits: Boat is wonderful abdominal strengthener. It strengthens virtually all the muscles in the abdomen as well as lower back muscles. Note that your abdominal muscles may quiver in this pose because they are holding a strong isometric contraction while lengthening the muscle. Typically when you contract the rectus abdominus you shorten the muscle by rounding the spine, as in a stomach crunch. Boat pose asks it to maintain both length and strength simultaneously, which makes it challenging. I know most of us are hoping to get our belly back in shape after delivering. This pose can definitely help, but patience is important. Unless you have an army of nannies, maids, and personal trainers, you won't look like Heidi Klum two months after delivery—but that is more than okay as something far more important than “six-pack abs” has entered your life.

Important note: Wait until you have gotten clearance from your primary care provider before doing this pose. This pose is particularly contraindicated for diastasis recti.



Bridge (*Setu Bandha Sarvangasana*)

1. Begin lying down and bend your knees.
2. Scoot your hips as close to your feet as you can, hopefully touching your heels with your fingertips.
3. Feet and knees both stay hip-width apart and the heel lines up behind the second toe—have someone check your alignment the first few times you do this pose.
4. Engage your abdominals by pulling your navel down towards the floor.
5. Keeping the strength in the belly, lift your hips then peel your back off the floor one vertebrae at a time. Note that peeling yourself up and down several times is a wonderful way to regain strength in your abdominal muscles and articulation in your spine.
6. Roll to the outside of your right shoulder, then to the outside of your left shoulder, clasping their hands underneath your back to add a chest opener. If you need additional support to hold the hips up, take the hands onto the back of the hips instead of clasping them together.
7. The chin stays slightly away from the chest so the neck rests comfortably on the floor.
8. The eyes look straight to the ceiling; because the neck bears weight in this pose, keep the head centered and avoid turning the head.

Pose Benefits: Bridge is a gentle inversion and a supported chest opener. This also strengthens the quadriceps muscles in the thighs. In this pose, you place the heart above the head, changing the normal gravitational resistance for your blood flow. This change of scenery does wonders for the mind as you look at the world from a completely different angle.

Important note: Wait until you have gotten clearance from your primary care provider before doing this pose. This pose is particularly contraindicated for diastasis recti.



Lying Spinal Twist (*Jathara Parivartanasana*)

1. Lie on your back.
2. Bend your knees and place your feet flat on the floor. Square yourself so your shoulders and hips line up.
3. Extend the left leg straight out along the floor, pointing the toes straight up in the air.
4. Push your right foot into the floor enough to lift your hips and swing them two inches to the right, then place your right foot on top of your left thigh, just above the knee.
5. Roll all the way over onto your left hip, letting the right knee descend towards the floor.
6. While anchoring both shoulders down on the floor, stretch your arms straight out to the side.
7. Classically you would turn your head left in this pose, turning your head in the opposite direction of your knee, but you can also turn your head in the same direction—see how your neck feels that day and what feels best for you. Just make sure that when you change sides your head goes the other way so both sides of the neck get a stretch.

Pose Benefits: Twists are thought to be cleansing poses by stimulating internal organs such as the liver and intestines in the same way that a massage stimulates muscle tissue. Lying Spinal Twist provides a passive opener for the pectoral muscles in the chest along with the gluteus muscles in the hips. This twist also provides a great release for the back.

Important note: Wait until you have gotten clearance from your primary care provider before doing this pose. This pose is particularly contraindicated for diastasis recti.



Neck Stretch

1. Begin sitting or standing.
2. Grab your right wrist with your left hand and pull your right hand down towards the outside of your left thigh.
3. Drop your left ear towards your left shoulder.
4. You can rotate the head a bit until you feel a strong stretch.
5. Some people prefer to do the same stretch, only pulling the hand across the back of the body, which will better stretch the levator scapulae.
6. If you feel much tighter on one side of your neck, do that side first, then do the other side, then repeat the first side so you get to it at least twice.
7. Note that you can do this if the baby is positioned safely on a breastfeeding support pillow. You can also do just the head tilt portion while holding the baby.

Pose Benefits: This is not a yoga pose per se, but it's a wonderful thing to do. Our necks take so much abuse in our daily lives. The upper trapezius muscles in the tops of the shoulders and the levator scapulae in the neck often overwork while cradling a baby in our arms because we often shrug our shoulders in times of tension—remember to actively drop your shoulders while nursing. Also, while carrying a baby in our arms we tend to shrug our shoulders. These muscles also can tighten up when nursing in the side-lying position.



Open Cobbler's, Variation of Bound Angle (*Baddha Konasana*)

1. Begin from sitting. Note that I have labeled Mom as Partner A and Mom's partner as Partner B.
2. Bending the knees, both partners take the soles of their own feet together, letting the knees fall towards the floor.
3. Feet should be several inches away from the groin to allow some space in the back of the knee.
4. Partner A folds forward from the hips as Partner B reclines on Partner A's back.
5. Partner B can open up his arms and rest his hands wherever it allows his chest to open comfortably; he can rest his hands either on the floor, on his thighs, or on Partner A's knees.
6. After eight complete breath cycles, Partner B folds forward and Partner A reclines back to switch.

Pose Benefits: Open Cobbler's is a great hip opener for the partner folding forward, opening the inner thighs. For the partner reclining back, along with opening the hips, Open Cobbler's provides a great opening in the chest. When you recline back, you release the pectoralis muscles in the chest, which gets very tight from cradling a baby for hours every day. Open Cobbler's is a very calming pose, which makes it a great pose to do before bedtime.

Important note: Wait until you have gotten clearance from your primary care provider before doing this pose. This pose is particularly contraindicated for diastasis recti.



Helpful Movements

The body needs to move to keep the joints lubricated and health. That's very difficult in the initial days of newborn care, but there are some things you can do.

- Remember to relax your joints while nursing. Find supportive pillows so that you do not have to hold the baby tightly with your arms. Drop your shoulders away from your ears to avoid tension in the upper trapezius. Relax your wrist, especially your thumb joint, to avoid Dequervain's syndrome, also known as "mother's wrist."
- When not nursing, circle as much as you can—arm circles, wrist circles, and hip circles can all help prevent shoulder pain, wrist pain, and lower-back pain respectively.
- While nursing, change your head position—tilt your head from side-to-side, turn your head to look left and right. Also, try this—retract your jaw as far as you can, then tilt your head back and shake it gently a few times.
- Walk, walk, walk! Finding a comfortable baby carrier that enables you to swing your arms really helps reduce tension in the muscles and joints.

About Kimberlee Jensen Stedl

Kimberlee is a Yoga Alliance Registered Yoga Teacher. She has been an American Council on Exercise (ACE) certified instructor since 1992. Kimberlee is also a YogaFit® certified instructor and an Aerobics and Fitness Association of America (AFAA) certified Group Fitness Instructor. She is a member of the American Council on Exercise (ACE) Continuing Education Faculty and is an authorized AFAA continuing education provider. Her yoga teacher training includes the special arts of teaching prenatal and postnatal yoga, yoga for seniors and kids yoga. Kimberlee is also co-author of *Yoga for Scuba Divers* and *Yoga with a Friend: Develop trust, communication, strength, and compassion when you practice yoga with a partner*. Both books are available online at resellers such as Amazon.com. *Yoga with a Friend* is also available in Missoula at The Downtown Dance Collective, Fact & Fiction Books, and The Good Food Store.

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