

Ask Our Expert

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***Sometimes after attending an Ashtanga class from 8:30 to 10:30 p.m., I find it very hard to get my heart rate back to normal. The feeling lasts for hours, and I am awake well into the night. What am I doing wrong?
- Elda Garcia-Posada, Madrid***

Ashtanga yoga is definitely an energy-raising practice. The constant flow of movement and breath is designed to detoxify and enliven, ideally bringing your metabolic rate back to normal through the finishing poses. This leaves you feeling rested and energized, the ideal conditions for pranayama and meditation.

The overstimulation you're feeling may indicate overexertion. During your next practice, pay particular attention to your mental and emotional states while going through the poses. Is there too much effort? Are you rushing the poses and losing connection with a smooth flow of Ujjayi breathing – neither overly loud and forced nor shallow and quick? In every pose, count your inhalations, seeing if you can inhale for four to five seconds before you exhale, then match the out-breath to that length. When you lose the breath and feel yourself struggling again, pause, reestablish your inner rhythm, and let this direct your practice.

Ashtanga Yoga is best done in the morning. If this is not possible, I suggest you emphasize the finishing postures and allow meditation time before you attempt to go to sleep. Then let lying down in bed be a mindfulness practice: If you lie awake awhile, simply let your mind rest in spacious attention, noticing the worry about not sleeping but not identifying with it, just watching the thoughts and letting them go.

***I've been practicing yoga for about three years, and I'm still having difficulty coming into full Lotus. I can comfortably achieve Half Lotus on both sides, but I can't make the final step into full Lotus. I'm not quite sure what's holding me back. Do you have any suggestions?
- via e-mail***

People often associate yoga with the Lotus Pose, or Padmasana, which gets its name from the lotus flower it resembles. Padmasana is said to have a balancing effect on the body and prana, and thus a calming effect on the mind.

In yoga texts, it is often touted as the destroyer of all disease. In the Hatha Yoga Pradipika, it is said to bring about changes in metabolic structure and brain patterns, and to stimulate acupuncture meridians of the stomach, gall bladder, spleen, kidneys, and liver. It also tones the sacral and coccygeal nerves by supplying them with increased blood flow. These are all good reasons to aspire to sit in full Lotus. However, this goal can be detrimental to the balanced functioning of many people's knees. Since you can sit in Ardha Padmasana (Half Lotus Pose), you obviously have some external range of motion in your hips. In order to progress safely to full Lotus, you need to further encourage that external rotation without straining the knees.

There are several poses that increase agility of the connective tissue around the hip joint and the flow of prana to it, especially when held for up to five minutes each: Eka Pada Rajakapotasana (One-Legged Pigeon Pose), bending forward over the front leg; Gomukhasana (Cow Face Pose); and Baddha Konasana (Bound Angle Pose), with the feet about 2 feet from the pelvis. It is helpful to put a small cushion under the bent-knee thigh near the hip in Pigeon Pose, so the bones rest on some support and the weight of the body is not all forward, which puts pressure on the knees. If you do feel pressure, eliminate this pose from your practice.

For some, Lotus Pose may never be possible simply as a result of anatomy, not because of any shortcoming in practice. Anyone strongly internally rotated at the hip joint should not attempt to push this pose. Siddhasana (Adept's Pose), done seated with one ankle directly in front of the other, is just as effective as a meditation posture, as it is also said to balance the pranic and mental forces. Both Lotus Pose and Adept's Pose can be detrimental to someone suffering from sciatica, however; in that case, Vajrasana (Thunderbolt Pose) – in which you sit on the heels – is the ideal meditation pose.

The main thing to remember is that you should never try to do with the knee what the hip joint is unable to do. In the end, floating on the Lotus is really more a state of mind than the accomplishment of any pose.

I have just had a child and am receiving mixed reports as to when I can go back to my Ashtanga practice, which I was doing regularly right up to giving birth, with modification for my swelling belly. I had a natural birth with no complications.

– Bella, Perth, Western Australia

After we have passed through the labyrinth of giving birth and are joyously nursing our infants, we have to remember that our bodies have been through a major transformation and have now become milk factories. Not only are we digesting our food for our own nourishment, but many of those nutrients that we usually absorb are now being passed along as a beautiful and necessary gift of sustenance for our child. Our life is no longer our own and in this way, we have been catapulted across a threshold, from a life directed by our own wants and interests, to one of selfless giving, day and night. This is depleting and exhausting. You now need to nurture yourself more than ever, as it is no longer an imperative for your own healthy living, but someone else's' life depends on it. I have seen so many new mothers misconstrue the natural mothering instinct of service to mean they are entitled now to forget their own care, with often damaging effects to mother and child.

My suggestion is that you start back to a yoga practice as soon as possible. What you practice will need some reevaluation with your schedule and body being different now. I found the day after I gave birth, I was on my deck doing gentle forward bends and hip openers. It was such a delight now that my belly could fold forward again. During the baby's first nap, I would also take one, and during the second, in the morning, I would do my yoga practice. Within a week I was doing 1st series again without the jump throughs, ending the session when she would awake. Sometimes later in the day I would pick up my practice where I had left off in the morning. My new value was to remain flexible, not just of body, but with myself, my practice. Some days I would only do the middle floor section, and others I had the energy for standing poses also. Other days I would do one pose and then lay in savasana the rest of the time. Intuiting my energy each day was more important than ever now.

Along with doing postures, nursing had become the most important practice. It allowed me the opportunity to be within the mindfulness practice of simple moment to moment being. More than any other time in parenting, this first year with an infant is about living the yogic rhythm of ease and response, being fully available for what is needed each moment with no personal agenda, while being willing to give up expectations of how things ought to be. It is a precious and oh so impermanent time. More than ever, continue to practice, but really live the practice, moment by glorious moment.

I want to choose a yoga class with the best possible benefits to aid fertility and conception. I do have a fertility video on yoga but was wondering if Yin yoga would be a good choice.
- Jasmin Hong Kong

Yoga is an excellent practice for balancing all the systems of the body and preparing it for the arduous and beautiful transformation of pregnancy. The only style of Hatha Yoga that would harm the potential for pregnancy is one in which the woman is practicing very vigorously, every day for years. This would imbalance the Prana which flows toward the core of the body, or Yin Qi as the emphasis in athletic yoga is on the muscles, or superficial tissues, predominately emphasizing the Yang Qi. I have known strong athletic women who, through their obsession of Yang activity free of a counterbalance of rest and reflection, have caused the cessation of their moon cycle. It was through a change in both attitude and activities, that they assisted their flow to reemerge, and pregnancy soon followed.

Yin yoga is a wonderful practice both for quieting the active mind, and for encouraging the prana or Qi(chi) to consistently flow through the 6 main meridians in the legs which are connected to the health of these major organs (the spleen/pancreas, liver, kidney, urinary bladder, stomach, and gall bladder). A system with balanced Qi and healthy organs is of course more likely to become and sustain a healthy pregnancy. The other benefit is the emphasis in the Yin practice on forward bending. The pressure to the lower belly stimulates prana flow there as well. This lower abdomen region is the domain of the major energy center or chakra called the Svadhisthana which controls the reproductive organs.

As the great yogi Hiroshi Motoyama has written “the Svadhisthana Chakra oversees the actual working of sexual energy and the sexual act, the initial formation of a child, and the subdivision of the sexual cells which causes the child to grow within the mother. The Svadhisthana Chakra is the chakra responsible for sexual reproduction, cellular division, and the formation of the human body at the physical level.” Needless to say, the more energy that is drawn to this center both through pressure and stretching (as is so wonderfully emphasized in the Yin poses of shoelace, straddle splits, full forward bend, and square pose), as well as focusing the mind there, the greater will be the value to one’s journey into motherhood. I recommend you find a Yin yoga teacher, read Paul Grilley’s book, Yin Yoga and/or use my practice video Yoga with Sarah Powers, Yin and Vinyasa flow to supplement your other fertility choices.

What is the purpose of performing Sun Salutations? Can you recommend a series of salutations to begin a daily yoga practice?

- Laurie Diaz, Tampa, FL

Sun Salutations or Surya Namaskar can be a complete practice in and of itself. These 12 or so poses linked in a series which lengthen and strengthen, flex and extend, many of the main muscles of the body while distributing the prana flow throughout the system. There are many sun salutation variations but I prefer the lunge salute the most because it lengthens and contracts the psoas muscle, our major hip flexor. The psoas is connected both in the groin at the lesser trochanter and at T12 and all the lumbar vertebrae, giving important flexion and length to the lower back. The lunge also stretches the musculature of the upper and inner thighs while also stimulating the stomach, spleen and liver meridians.

The cycle goes as follows: stand in Tadasana, find the center of your breath, alignment, and balance. Inhale and reach up (metaphorically kissing the sun, representing our source of sustenance as well as the light within that burns continuously for awakening). Exhale, and fold down to Uttanasana, bowing to this source, while stretching the hamstrings, calf muscles and lower back. Inhale, keeping the hands down, lift the chest, exhale step the right foot back and lower the back knee and foot down. In the lunge, inhale and lift the arms up, keep the left buttocks strong while slightly hugging in the inner groins toward each other, the neck in neutral as you look forward. Stay for 5 breaths, exhale and lower the arms. Inhale and step the left foot back into plank (both hands under the shoulders, both arms and legs straight), and then exhale and lower to Chaturanga Dandasana with (legs straight or knees on the ground) to strengthen the arms and trapezius, drawing the belly back as you lower. Then lower the pelvis, tuck the toes and inhale as you lift the chest and legs in Shalabhasana, strengthening the lower back. Alternate between having the legs together and bringing them apart each round. Stay in this pose for 5 breaths. Exhale and lower the feet and head. Inhale up to plank, and exhale to downward facing dog, lengthening the hamstrings, calves and torso, while strengthening the upper body. After 5 breaths inhale and step the right foot forward into a lunge on the other side, exhale there. Then inhale and lift the arms for 5 breaths. On the fifth exhale, lower the arms, and inhale step the back foot forward to meet the front one, lift the chest, and exhale, fold into Uttanasana. On the inhale, lift the arms, leading from the sternum and come up to standing (bend the knees if the lower back is weak), exhale, standing tall with the hands in Namaste. Feel the effects. Notice the flow of energy (prana) moving within as you stand vibrantly steady; the body enlivened, the mind steadied. See what it's like to repeat this for 5 rounds or 15 to 30 minutes. This can be the beginning of your practice or a full practice in and of itself. Incorporating Sun Salutations regularly can allow your practice to be a slow dance of conscious movement dedicated to energized presence.

Which poses are best to avoid for an aggravated sciatic nerve? Are there any poses that are restorative or healing for sciatica?

- Anastasia Coon, San Luis Obispo, CA

Many people have experienced or at least heard of sciatica. This is the condition whereby either compression of the L4-S1 nerve roots affect the sciatic distribution or it is injured as it exits the buttocks. It is also influenced by the piriformis muscle which originates on the anterior of the sacrum and passes under the sciatic notch, inserting on the top of the greater trochanter. The piriformis functions in lateral rotation of the thigh. Many practitioners with tight hips and/or weak and tight lower back muscles will find that straight leg forward bends aggravate or even create sciatica. If the pelvis is unable to rotate forward (flexion of the hip) by the psoas and iliacus muscles, quadratus lumborum, and rectus abdominis, then anteversion or rotation of the pelvis forward will be limited, resulting in the pelvis rotating back (retroversion). So, instead of bending forward from the hips, the spine is bending forward while the pelvis is tugging back. The result can be either a strain or pull of the SI ligaments or sciatica. This happens more often in seated forward bending where the pelvis is fixed to the floor. It is therefore important to avoid these poses as well as any pose where the symptoms of shooting pain develop. It is often predominately on one side only, so instead of taking a full seated forward bend (Paschimottanasana), bring the leg in toward the groin on the side you are not experiencing sciatica, if you feel the pain shots more from the lower back. If it is more located in your buttocks, bring in the leg you experience the pain in if you do seated forward bend. This is Janu Sirshasana and is a much better pose for those with sciatica. If one leg in still makes you suffer from the shooting nerve pain, avoid seated forward bends all together.

Using your practice to heal the condition is possible with patience and specific sequencing. It is important to strengthen the muscles around the sciatic nerve and bring circulation to this region. First of all, I suggest you bend the knees when in standing forward bends and down dog to assist in the forward pelvic rotation. Also, moving in and out of poses increases the circulation to the area. From the belly, Shalabhasana or boat pose is the best one for healing, as it strengthens the lower back muscles while bringing circulation to the hip muscles. The variation that is best is to inhale, lift the chest and legs, exhale there. Then inhale and and bring the legs back together. (If lifting the feet aggravates it, then do this with the feet moving along the floor). Repeat this 5 times before lowering down. This sequence could be inserted within the sun salutations and/or between the other backbends like

Bujangasana and Danurasana. Either way, the more often you practice it, the better.

On your back, doing Setu Bandha or Bridge pose is also helpful. I prefer to alternate the distance between the feet each round to isolate different muscle groups. First with the feet together, then hip width, and lastly with the feet and knees quite wide, keeping the inner thighs (adductors) engaged. For increased circulation, move up and down in the pose before staying stationary a number of breaths. Stretching the area with pigeon pose coming forward and twisting in Ardha Matseyendrasana may also be helpful.

Lastly, an important thing to remember is to continue with these poses long after the symptoms have disappeared, while still avoiding seated forward bends as reinjury is very common the first few months after it has healed.

Lately during my yoga classes, I find myself feeling very emotional. Several times I have felt my eyes fill up with tears during a pose. This has happened on a perfectly normal -even good days. Why is this, and is it normal?

- June

Emotional reactions during the yoga sessions are very common. We are doing so much more than just exercising our bodies when we commit to the yogic path through the physical asana practice. Although slowly growing in the west, it is much more common in Asian thought to recognize the inseparability of the body, emotions and mind. Chinese doctors insist that our organs are linked to our emotions, which constantly affects our overall health, while Indian Ayurvedic doctors and yogis inform us of the interconnection between our state of mind and our breath and bodies. So it follows that the emotional impact of our experiences are imprinted into our bodies, affecting the balance of our vital energy and harmony (or disharmony) of our whole system.

Both our inherited constitution and all that we have digested in the manner of food and experiencing is continually forming and reforming this ever changing body. During the yoga session as we stretch, tone and strengthen our muscles, organs, joints and bones, we are inevitably releasing blocked or stagnant energy, both physical/energetic and emotional. Energy is in constant motion but through habitual protection, unaware living, trauma, or disposition this constant flow stagnates in certain areas of the body. while also determining predictable patterns in our emotionality, causing imbalances. Without a practice to supplement this deficiency of flowing vital

energy, we may not only end up sick, but become closed off to deeper feeling tones, unable to access an immediacy with life in its moments.

Conversely, when we develop an awareness discipline that is not solely focused on moving the body merely with a physical goal in mind i.e. sports, dance, calisthenics..., then you may notice a release of emotional energy seemingly unrelated to the specific moment at hand. Our willfulness when playing sports may override these feelings, but in yoga asana we have a precious opportunity to welcome in all states, uncensored and free of expectations or analysis. Your mindfulness of your emotions can then grow to help encourage you to include a broader range of feeling states to be metabolized as they are happening, which is called spontaneous mindfulness. But this is a process, and those moments lived within your conditioned patterns of reactivity remain held in the body. Yoga is a great way of moving these patterns through you.

I suggest not blocking nor seeking to mentally figure out these feelings as they emerge during your practice. Simply stay with the feeling tone itself, the way it affects your experience in your body. Depending on the shade of the emotion, you may experience sensations like a change in breath rhythm, tightnesses in the belly or restrictions in the chest, waves of chills through the spine, contraction in the shoulders or a heaviness of heart with tears in the eyes. Often accompanying these experiences are uninvestigated beliefs and assumptions going on in the mind. We may be playing out a story in our heads about ourselves or someone else that we assume to be true. Awareness practice teaches us to diminish feeding the story line which greatly stimulates the emotional tenor creating a whole chemical reaction in the body. This can then cycle us into more fragmented thoughts, wild emotions, and further disconnection from our bodies.

There is nothing wrong with emotional release during our yoga poses, this is healing. The problem stems from either unskillfully indulging in or ignoring what is arising for us presently. The best way to practice is to stay with what is true this moment, let go of holding on or pushing away any aspect of your experience. Stay curious of the process, while relaxing any expectation that something other than what is happening should be happening. Whenever you are persistently overwhelmed by these emotions, I suggest you seek out a spiritual friend or mentor to process the storm with.

While in camel pose I find it uncomfortable to rest my head on my shoulders. The discomfort is in the back of my neck. Why does this

***happen? Do I need to modify the pose?
- Maxine Hartswick, Portland, Oregon***

Ustrasana is a wonderful backbend for bringing increased vitality to the organs of respiration. It does require that we lift out of our waist, hug our inner thighs, lift our chest and lean our shoulders back. Bringing the head back is not necessary to reap the benefits of this pose. If you don't feel any discomfort in the neck when the head is dropped all the way back to rest on the trapezius muscles, then great, do it. If this creates a strain, then don't.

One reason this may not be comfortable could be simply be a tightness in the neck which will diminish with gradual lengthening and strengthening of these muscles. One way to do this is by alternating looking up and down in standing poses and right to left is shalabhasana. My husband is uncomfortable putting his head back as a residual effect from whip lash years ago that has lessened from yoga practice, but is still a weak area. I find it is quite advanced to be able to put the head back in any pose, Vira I included, and teaching these poses this way to beginners gives one the wrong impression about what they should be able to do. My advice is never strain, let your breath help you discover whether there is a free flow of energy or if you are imposing a posture onto the body that it is not ready for.

***I have trouble with my breathing when I'm asked to calm my breath or to observe it. My mind registers exactly the opposite and I start to suffocate. I suffer from panic attacks and I understand that proper breathing is at the heart of the practice. How do I rid myself of this mental resistance?
- Denise Lague, Toronto, Canada***

Breathing is our most intimate ally. It is with us through all we go through whether we feel agitated or at ease. The wisdom traditions suggest we focus on the breath as it is always happening now. We can not breath for yesterday, or anticipate how we will breath on hour from now. It is only now that we can be with the breath. It is a doorway into being intimate with the moment as it is. When you hear the suggestion to watch the breath, you may be confusing the method of watching, with the desired result, which you may assume means you must be calm.

The issue here may be historical for you, centering around being told to do something, coupled with the immediate fear of doing it wrong. So the method of watching the breath is immediately shattered with the self assessment of, I can't. We can not transcend patterns we are not aware of and we cannot become aware of that which we are not open to. So, the first step is simply to

acknowledge this pattern as it arises. Bear witness to it as it is, without wishing it were different, just as a naked truth of what's happening. Next, simply hold your attention on the physical sensations that are arising for you as you attempt to stay with the breath. At this point you are not trying to be successful at anything, merely to be aware of what our experience is in the moment, i.e.. tight feeling in the chest, short breath patterns, unease or anxiety. You are not turning away from the experience nor trying to alter or ignore it. You can even let go of trying to breath at all.

Awareness has it's own vitality. We are learning the steps toward trusting our own experience. What happens is just what happens, the suffering we experience is in our thinking something other than what is happening should be happening, and believing that voice, hence the panic attack. But mindfulness reeducates our perspective and allows us to then liberate negative emotional patterns by going through them, not fighting with or disallowing them. To deepen your understanding of these tools, I suggest seeing a therapist with a mindfulness background and/or going on a mindfulness retreat where they emphasize these tools.

***What do you think about backbending during pregnancy? It seems that in the Ashtanga vinyasa tradition, there isn't much taboo against it, yet the opposite seems to be true in the Iyengar tradition- any thoughts?
- Joanne Myrup, Taos, New Mexico***

The debate among different systems over which poses to do during pregnancy can cause any woman to feel frustrated and hesitant about how to proceed. I had been doing Ashtanga and Iyengar yoga for 7 years before I had my child. After reading up on yoga for pregnancy, I decided my practice and intuition were the best guides since every body has a unique system and therefore different experience of pregnancy. Of course, there are guidelines that can be useful as long as you test them on yourself to see if they ring true for you.

Each trimester brings different issues. In the first trimester, when the cell division is at it's most rapid and eons of evolution are coalescing in our bellies, we may feel fatigue or extreme nausea in which case gentle stimulation of circulation in the baby backbends when we have a reprieve from these symptoms may be helpful. Poses such as Shalabhasana, Bhujangasana, and Danurasana may feel invigorating, while Supta Vajrasana and Supta Virasana will be soothing if the knees allow these.

In the second trimester when the energy often feels enhanced by the pregnancy and the body, although swollen, is not usually uncomfortably large yet, stronger backbends may feel expansive and juicy. Poses such as Ustrasana, lunge backbend, bridge pose or even Urdva Danurasana if one normally practices this pose, may be incorporated into a sequence, with the first trimester backbends on the belly being phased out as one gets to 5 and 6 months pregnant. I have found many women enjoy putting their pelvis on a bolster and holding a straight arm cobra pose for a few minutes. You may find this backbend available to you until the 7-8th month and feel very nourished in the connective tissues along the sacrum and spine, a place where stagnant energy can cause discomfort.

Around the 6 month, it is common to start to feel uncomfortable whenever you are lying on your back. Many birth assistants suggest that we not lie down flat on our backs, even during sleep, because this position can cause reduced blood flow to the belly. I did feel an internal signal to leave aside bridge pose at a certain point as I no longer felt comfortable lying flat. No one needed to tell me when that was though, I simply felt it.

In the final 3 months, when one may fear back strain from the combination of relaxin easing the joints and the enhanced lordosis of the lumbar spine, you may find Supta Virasana with a bolster feels appropriate, or that Ustrasana with the hands on the buttocks or resting back on a couch or low chair will give the feeling of opening the chest and stretching the back muscles feels great. I do not think one needs to worry about the increased lordosis in the spine unless one enters into pregnancy with a disc displacement.

In the end, as is always advised for anyone, strain should never be endured. This is a time of learning to respect and honor your body in its amazingly mysterious wisdom, of making space in your body and in your life for this new addition. I know of no better way to enhance these feminine insights than by continuing a devoted yoga and meditation practice throughout one's pregnancy.