

YOGA IN ANTENATAL CARE AND CHILDBIRTH: A HOLISTIC REVIEW OF MATERNAL WELL-BEING

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Article Received on 05 May 2026,
Article Revised on 25 May 2026,
Article Published on 01 June 2026,

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20526917>

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How to cite this Article: Dr. Abhirami K. Dileep*, Dr. Amrutha Jayan (2026). Yoga In Antenatal Care And Childbirth: A Holistic Review Of Maternal Well-Being. World Journal of Pharmaceutical Research, 15(11), 1891–1900. This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license.

ABSTRACT

Pregnancy is a transformative period marked by significant physiological, emotional, and psychological changes. Integrating yoga into antenatal care has gained increasing attention for its multidimensional benefits. This paper presents a holistic exploration of the role of yoga during pregnancy and childbirth, drawing from both ancient yogic philosophy and contemporary scientific research. Prenatal yoga, comprising physical postures (asanas), breathing techniques (pranayama), and meditation, supports maternal well-being by enhancing flexibility, strengthening pelvic muscles, reducing stress, and improving overall posture and circulation. These practices contribute to better labour preparedness, reduce the perception of pain, and may positively influence labour outcomes. A narrative review methodology was adopted, involving critical analysis of classical yogic texts alongside recent clinical

studies. The synthesis highlights yoga's potential to not only facilitate a more balanced and empowered childbirth experience but also promote the birth of a healthy child. This study underscores the need for integrative maternal care models that recognize the value of traditional practices like yoga in modern obstetric settings.

KEYWORDS: Yoga practice, Prenatal care, Pregnancy.

INTRODUCTION

Yoga plays a vital role in maintaining overall health and well-being, making it an essential part of modern life. Physically, yoga helps improve flexibility, muscle strength, and posture,

while also supporting the proper functioning of vital systems and aiding in boosting immunity and managing chronic conditions. In addition, yoga significantly enhances mental and emotional well-being. Regular practice helps reduce stress, anxiety, and depression by calming the mind and regulating the nervous system. Spiritually, yoga connects the body, mind, and soul, guiding individuals toward a sense of purpose and inner harmony and promotes self-awareness, mindfulness, and inner peace.

Pregnancy is a crucial and transformative phase in a woman's life, requiring special attention, care, and support. It is a period where the health and well-being of both the mother and the developing baby are closely interconnected. Proper prenatal care ensures that the baby receives essential nutrients and the mother remains healthy throughout the pregnancy. Regular check-ups, a balanced diet, emotional support, physical activity like prenatal yoga, and avoidance of harmful substances are all vital components of care.

Rooted in Indian philosophy, yoga combines physical postures (asanas), breathing techniques (pranayama), and meditation (dhyana) to enhance well-being. Its application in pregnancy care has garnered global interest for improving maternal outcomes and easing childbirth. In essence, yoga is not just a form of exercise—it is a holistic path to a healthier, more meaningful, and fulfilled life.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, narrative review approach to explore the role of yoga during pregnancy and its impact on childbirth through the lens of yogic philosophy and contemporary research. The methodology involved the following steps.

Literature Search and Selection

- A comprehensive search of relevant literature was conducted using academic databases including PubMed, Google Scholar, Scopus, and the AYUSH Research Portal. Inclusion criteria focused on studies and articles published in English from 2000 to the present that examined prenatal yoga practices, maternal health, and childbirth outcomes.
- Philosophical and Theoretical Framework: Classical yogic texts such as the *Patanjali Yoga Sutras*, *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, and *Garbhopanishad* were also reviewed to provide a philosophical context.

In addition to literature review, interviews were conducted with certified prenatal yoga instructors and Ayurvedic obstetricians to understand traditional practices and clinical applications.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

Data from selected sources were thematically analysed to identify common patterns related to physical, psychological, and obstetric outcomes associated with yoga practice during pregnancy.

By integrating ancient yogic wisdom with contemporary scientific evidence, this study aims to offer a comprehensive and holistic understanding of prenatal yoga as an effective approach to maternal care, facilitating natural and harmonious parturition and the birth of a healthy progeny.

Importance of Antenatal Care and Significance of prenatal yoga for maternal and foetal health

Prenatal care is a fundamental component of maternal healthcare that ensures the health and well-being of both the mother and the developing foetus throughout pregnancy. It enables early detection and management of common pregnancy-related complications such as gestational diabetes, hypertension, preeclampsia, and anaemia. According to the World Health Organisation (2016), timely and appropriate antenatal care significantly reduces maternal and perinatal morbidity and mortality by facilitating preventive and therapeutic interventions.^[1] Regular check-ups during pregnancy allow healthcare providers to monitor foetal growth, detect congenital anomalies, and assess gestational age and foetal positioning through ultrasounds and clinical evaluations, thereby contributing to safer delivery outcomes.^[2] Prenatal care also includes nutritional counselling and essential supplementation. Additionally, prenatal care addresses psychological well-being, as mental health issues such as anxiety and depression are prevalent during pregnancy and can affect maternal and neonatal outcomes.^[3] Moreover, adequate prenatal care has a significant impact on reducing adverse birth outcomes such as preterm birth, low birth weight, and neonatal mortality.^[4] Prenatal care is a comprehensive and indispensable aspect of pregnancy that significantly reduces maternal and neonatal morbidity and mortality, thereby reinforcing its vital role in advancing global maternal and child health outcomes.

Yoga plays a vital role in prenatal care as a holistic, non-invasive practice that supports the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of pregnant women. It strengthens the pelvic and core muscles, enhances flexibility, and promotes better posture—factors that are crucial for easing the physical strain of pregnancy and facilitating smoother labour. Strengthening these muscles can also aid in postpartum recovery and reduce the risk of urinary incontinence. Additionally, yoga helps to alleviate lower back pain, a frequent issue caused by the shift in posture and weight distribution during pregnancy. Gentle stretching and posture correction through yoga relieve tension and promote spinal alignment. Moreover, yoga has been shown to reduce symptoms such as nausea, headaches, and fatigue, all of which commonly affect pregnant women, especially during the first trimester. Regular practice may also contribute to lowering the risk of preterm labour by promoting uterine relaxation, improving circulation, and balancing hormonal activity.

Yoga is very effective in reducing stress and anxiety, which are common during pregnancy due to hormonal fluctuations and the anticipation of childbirth. Prenatal yoga is known to modulate the autonomic nervous system, reducing cortisol levels and promoting relaxation through controlled breathing and mindfulness practices. A study showed a significant reduction in stress and improvement in heart rate variability among pregnant women practising integrated yoga, indicating better cardiovascular and emotional regulation.^[5] Mindful breathing and relaxation techniques promote emotional stability, which enhances mental resilience. It also significantly improves sleep quality, a major concern for many pregnant women, particularly in the later stages of gestation. One scientific article presents that mindfulness-based yoga significantly improved sleep and reduced anxiety in expectant mothers.^[6]

Importantly, yoga encourages deeper maternal-foetal bonding and enhances self-awareness, allowing women to connect with their changing bodies and their growing babies on a deeper level.^[7] Yoga-based childbirth preparation also fosters confidence, resilience, and pain-coping strategies that can lead to shorter labour durations and reduced need for medical interventions. Furthermore, Rakhshani *et al.* (2012) study demonstrated that yoga improved utero-placental circulation and birth outcomes, even in high-risk pregnancies.^[8]

Role of Yoga for Stress During Pregnancy

Pregnancy and childbirth, though natural processes, involve significant physical, mental, and emotional changes that influence maternal and foetal well-being. Stress and conditions such

as pregnancy-induced hypertension can adversely affect pregnancy outcomes through activation of the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal (HPA) axis, leading to endocrine disturbances, impaired uterine circulation, anxiety, premature delivery, and postpartum depression. Yoga serves as a simple, natural, and cost-effective approach to support women during antenatal and postnatal periods by promoting physical fitness, mental relaxation, flexibility, reduced labour pain, and normal delivery. In lactating mothers, Yoga helps reduce stress and enhances oxytocin and prolactin secretion through breathing exercises, relaxation, meditation, and specific postures, thereby improving breast milk production and maternal well-being.






Precautions while doing yoga during pregnancy^[9]




- Modify poses to make room for the growing belly. Choose gentle variations of asanas to reduce strain and maintain comfort.
- Have a light snack or juice before yoga. Blood sugar levels can drop quickly during pregnancy, so avoid practising on an empty stomach.
- Prioritise stability and strength over flexibility and endurance. Hormonal changes increase joint laxity, so focus on controlled movements rather than deep stretching.
- Avoid poses that compress the uterus or overstretch the abdomen. Skip deep forward bends, closed twists, and intense backbends to protect the baby and abdominal muscles.
- Use open twists (from the shoulders and upper spine only). Practice gentle, open twists that keep the abdomen relaxed and spacious.
- Avoid inverted poses and abdominal compression. Inversions like shoulder stand or handstand, and poses like *Parivritta Trikonasana*, *Navasana*, and *Naukasana* can strain the core and reduce blood flow.
- Avoid prone poses (lying on the stomach). Poses like *Bhujangasana*, *Shalabhasana*, and *Dhanurasana* put pressure on the uterus and are unsafe.
- Be cautious with arm movements when standing. If you feel dizzy, avoid raising your arms above your head to prevent imbalance or fainting.
- Skip intense cleansing practices (kriyas). Techniques like *Kapalabhati* involve strong abdominal movements and should be avoided during pregnancy.
- Avoid breath retention and forceful pranayama. Steer clear of *Bhastrika* and *Kumbhaka*; instead, practice calming techniques.


- Engage the pelvic floor mindfully Maintain awareness and gentle engagement of pelvic floor muscles during all poses and breathing practices to support childbirth and postpartum recovery.
- Hydration and temperature regulation must be ensured to prevent overheating.
- Professional guidance from certified prenatal yoga instructors is essential.
- Contraindications include high-risk pregnancy conditions such as placenta previa, preeclampsia, or a history of recurrent miscarriage.

Recommended yoga practices

Yoga Protocol for Pregnant Women (45 Minutes)^[10]

S.No	Yoga Practices	Rounds	Duration
1	Prayer		1 Minute
2	Yogic Sukshma Vyayama (Micro Circulation Practices): Neck, Shoulder, Trunk and Knee movements	3 Rounds each	8 Minutes
3	Yogasanas – Standing, Sitting, Supine and Relaxative Postures		20 Minutes
	• <i>Tadasana</i> (Mountain Pose)		
	• <i>Katichakrasana</i> (Standing Spinal Twist Pose) – Avoid in 1st & 3rd trimester		
	• <i>Ardhachakrasana</i> (Half Wheel Pose) – Avoid in 1st & 3rd trimester		
	• <i>Veeerbhadrasana-I</i> (Warrior Pose) – Avoid in 1st trimester		
	• <i>Dandasana</i> (Staff Pose)		

	• <i>Sukhasana</i> (Easy Pose)		
	• <i>Badhakonasana</i> (Cobbler Pose) – Avoid in 1st trimester		
	• <i>Marjariasana</i> (Cat Pose) – Avoid in 1st trimester		
	• <i>Malasana</i> (Garland Pose) – Avoid in 1st trimester		
	• <i>Gomukhasana</i> (Cow Face Pose)		
	• <i>Utkatasana</i>		
	• <i>Supta Badhakonasana</i> (Reclining Bound Angle Pose)		
	• <i>Parsvakonasana</i> (Side Angle Pose) – Avoid in 3rd trimester		
	• <i>Shavasana</i> (Corpse Pose)		
	• <i>Balasana</i> (Side Lying Pose)		
4	Breathing Practices – Sectional Breathing (Abdominal, Thoracic and Clavicular Breathing)	3 Rounds each	
5	<i>Pranayama</i> – <i>Nadi Shodhana</i> , <i>Bhramari</i> , <i>Ujjayi</i> , <i>Sheetali</i> / <i>Sitkari</i>	3 Rounds each	10 Minutes

			
6	<i>Dhyana</i> – Om Meditation or Breath Awareness Meditation; Omkara Chanting		5 Minutes
7	<i>Shanti Patha</i>		1 Minute

Total Time: 45 Minutes

Contra indicated yoga postures^[11]

- *Naukasana* (Boat Pose)
- *Chakrasana* (Wheel Pose)
- *Ardha Matsyendrasana* (Sitting Half Spinal Twist)
- *Bhujangasana* (Cobra Pose)
- *Viparita Shalabhasana* (Superman Pose)
- *Halasana* (Plough Pose)

The benefits of Yoga practice during pregnancy

Yoga during pregnancy is a time-tested, holistic approach that supports both the physical and emotional needs of an expectant mother. It gently prepares the body for childbirth while nurturing a deep sense of inner calm and awareness. The combination of *asanas* (postures), *pranayama* (breathing techniques), and relaxation practices can significantly enhance prenatal care and overall maternal as well as foetal health. *Marjariasana* (Cat Stretch) gently stretches the spine, shoulders, and neck, easing stiffness and improving spinal flexibility, which is particularly important as the back endures more strain during pregnancy. *Konasana* (Side Bending Poses) enhance lateral flexibility, stretches the abdominal region, and helps alleviate constipation, a common discomfort during this period. Strength-building poses like *Veerabhadrasana* (Warrior Pose) and *Trikonasana* (Triangle Pose) strengthen the limbs and back, promote better posture, and enhance balance—crucial as the body's centre of gravity shifts. *Badhakonasana* (Butterfly Pose), especially beneficial in later stages, improves hip flexibility, reduces fatigue, and prepares the pelvic region for childbirth, potentially aiding in smoother delivery. *Viparita Karani* (Legs Up the Wall Pose) offers relief from lower back pain, improves pelvic blood flow, and reduces swelling and varicose veins. Deep relaxation is

achieved through *Shavasana* (Corpse Pose), which supports physical repair and emotional calm without the need for medication. Complementing these physical benefits, pranayama practices such as *Bhramari Pranayama* (Humming Bee Breath) help regulate blood pressure and reduce headaches, while *Nadi Shodhan Pranayama* (Alternate Nostril Breathing) calms the mind, releases emotional tension, balances body temperature, and enhances oxygenation—essential for both maternal health and foetal growth.^[12] Together, these practices offer a comprehensive and holistic approach to prenatal care.

CONCLUSION

Regular practice of prenatal yoga improves circulation, maintains flexibility, and tones the muscles without putting the body under stress. Emotionally, it empowers pregnant women to stay connected to their inner strength and trust the natural process of childbirth. The integration of movement, breath, and stillness creates a nurturing environment for both the mother and the growing baby. Yoga emerges as a safe, cost-effective, and non-pharmacological intervention during pregnancy, offering substantial benefits in maternal health and childbirth outcomes. Its incorporation into antenatal care protocols can enhance the quality of maternal healthcare when practised with medical consent and professional supervision. Further longitudinal studies and clinical trials are recommended to standardise prenatal yoga programs across diverse populations.

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