

Yoga for New Moms

Learn to navigate your first year of motherhood.

By Yoko Yoshikawa



When they say to rest the first week after giving birth and not to carry anything heavier than your baby, they mean it. Forgive me the graphic details, but I could not sit on my butt. I tried to take a walk four days after giving birth—and made it two and a half blocks before I had to sit down on someone’s lawn. I hobbled home and did not walk any farther than across the street for another five days.

In the first year after giving birth, you will crash headlong into the discovery that more often than not, what you want to do is not what you will get to do. You do not see the latest movie or take your usual trip to Hawaii. You are forced day by day—even moment to moment—to make the same conscious choice you made when you became pregnant: to be a good mother. And in the first year it often seems that being a mother means you cannot be anything else.

In his book, *Touching* (HarperCollins, 1986), anthropologist Ashley Montagu proposed that the first nine months of an infant’s life be called “*extero gestation*,” a period that is the same length of time spent in utero. After nine months in the womb, the baby must come out, because the mother’s pelvis can no longer accommodate her.

But, it is at least eight to 10 months before the baby can crawl and another four to six months beyond that before she can walk or talk. This is why the first months are so taxing. You are still your baby’s womb, although she has hatched free. Unbelievably fragile, she still needs you to monitor the ambient temperature, provide appropriate nourishment, regulate stimuli, and respond to her various eruptions.

At the same time that you must learn and do so much for this new and needy being, you are so tender and vulnerable yourself, exquisitely sensitive to the beauty and pathos of everything. Your body surges with hormones, and you cry at the drop of a hat. You are performing an enormous, everyday miracle: You have been womb, portal, and sustenance for a being making the transition from the unformed world to life. Everyone should be waiting upon you hand and foot, but most likely they are not—and it often feels as if you are just getting by.

Rest and Re-Integrate

How can you stay alive to the joy and glory of your first year of mothering without being overwhelmed? Yoga can help you. If you had a practice before your baby’s birth, try to get back to it as soon as you have the time to pay attention to yourself. That may be several weeks after giving birth; give yourself time.

If you have not practiced yoga before, there are books and classes (many studios offer mother and baby classes) to help you learn-but take it slowly and do not strain yourself.

This postnatal period is a good time for you to re-examine any assumptions you might have about yoga. If you view it as a practice that tones your muscles and makes you look good, you are missing some of the



most vibrant aspects of the practice. The roots of yoga practice reach back to Indian ascetics, who sought enlightenment through esoteric physical practices, material renunciation, and meditation.

For this short, intense time, when you renounce what may otherwise define you—your work, your art, your social and political life—and are so intimate with the basic rhythms of human existence, you can use your yoga practice to fully experience turning inward and letting go.

Be kind to yourself; let yoga be a balm to muscles that long to stretch and lungs that yearn for a deep breath. Use yoga to stretch wide open and play. When you feel wispy, let your practice ground you and help you draw strength up from the earth. When you are drowning in chaos, allow the clean geometry of yoga organize you again. When you feel dispirited, take on a challenging asana and remember the joy of learning.

Yoga practice can coax open your chest and shoulders, which slowly collapse inward from nursing and carrying the baby around. Engage in a gentle practice of asanas with the intention of listening to and loving your body, and you will give yourself-mind, body, and spirit-much-needed time to rest and re-integrate.

Do What You Can

However, carving out the time to do yoga isn't easy. If you had a practice before you became pregnant, you will probably expect more of yourself than is possible in these early months. Don't be too hard on yourself. Recognize that in the beginning, 20 minutes or half an hour—even 10 minutes—is enough. A mom that I know who has teenage boys throws her mat down in the hallway and does a Downward-Facing Dog every time she steps on it. Do what you can; that is good enough. You are already doing too much if you have a classical American nuclear family. As novelist and poet Opal Palmer Adisa said to Ariel Gore in Gore's book *The Mother Trip: Hip Mama's Guide to Staying Sane in the Chaos of Motherhood* (Seal Press, 2000): "Being a good mother is too many jobs for one person."

For the first three months or so after my daughter was born, I practiced "emergency yoga." This is yoga on the fly, ad hoc and crisis specific. I used Viparita Karani (Legs-up-the-Wall Pose) to soothe my jangled nerves when my partner was trying to walk and coax a wailing baby to silence and my job was to bite my lip and not intervene. A supported Child's Pose did the trick if I did not dare risk a hot bath because the sound of the running water might wake up my daughter.

I lay down in Supta Padangusthasana (Reclining Hand-to-Big-Toe Pose) if my left hip was to start bothering me. Chest openers over a bolster helped me when I felt as though nursing and carrying my daughter was turning me into a crab.

Perhaps your first concern is to get your body back in shape. Yoga practice can help you to do that over time, but in the first months doing less really is doing more. This is a good time to practice restorative yoga and meditation. Pick up Judith Lasater's *Relax and Renew* (Rodmell Press, 1995), recruit some blankets and pillows, and try postures that support release and opening without effort or strain. Sometimes a restorative practice can be just as good as a nap. Sometimes it can be better. You may discover as you practice that even though you are exhausted, your body needed to be re-aligned and to detoxify more than it needed to sleep. Over time restorative yoga will hone your powers of observation. You'll begin to sense how meditating on the subtle changes deep within your body brings a soft, liquid ease to your mind and spirit.

Writer and mom Noelle Oxenhandler writes in *The Eros of Parenthood* (St Martin's Press, 2001), about a



healthy mother's "attunement" to her child—keeping his needs uppermost and taking her cues from him. If you cultivate a quiet yoga practice while your body needs to heal and rest, you are attuned to your needs. And if you can be gentle, attentive, and loving with yourself, you will be that much more likely to be so with your child as well.

Ideally a yoga practice brings you to yourself, to who you are beyond your role as mother. Once upon a time your child's heart beat right under yours and you were as close as any two beings can be. However from the moment your child left your body, her work to become herself, independent of you, began.

Your work is to help her. For that you need to be able to let go of her as she needs you to—even when she does not know that she needs it and even as you love and want her impossibly close to you, always.

The first time that I practiced was a few weeks after giving birth. I was alone in the house, and I worked on the cool wood floor and moved slowly, like a worm, doing sequences close to the ground—Child's Pose, Cat-Cow pelvic tilts, Baddha Konasana, Bharadvajasana (Bharadvaja's Twist)—a practice premised on the breath, and my body's inclinations.

Within that quiet space everything else dropped away. No husband, no child—no relationship except the one between me and the practice, the moment-to-moment call to be right here.

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