Fertility

A Journey to Health and Healing

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AND

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Published by Demos Health
Yoga and Fertility

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“Yoga and Fertility is a great resource for women seeking to optimize their fertility. Yoga provides an important adjunct to the mind/body approach to fertility proven beneficial to reduce stress and improve mental and physical well-being. By presenting the ‘how’ and the ‘why’ of each exercise, the authors provide the reader with the knowledge, insight and encouragement to take full advantage of this powerful tool.”

Nancy A. Klein, M.D.
Reproductive Endocrinologist
Seattle Reproductive Medicine
Seattle, WA

“A wonderfully rich and concise manual. Lynn Jensen and Jill Petigara provide an easy to follow program to take you through poses that enhance each phase of the menstrual cycle, regardless of your familiarity with yoga. Beginner, intermediate, or advanced, you will find detailed photos, descriptions, and reasons for these healing exercises.”

Randine Lewis, L.Ac., Ph.D.
FABORM
www.thefertilesoul.com

“Only those who dare to plunge to their depths can re-emerge triumphant, wise and fulfilled. Lynn Jensen and Jill Petigara both longed to be mothers. Their struggle with infertility and the failure of medical intervention turned them back on themselves and to their Yoga practice. Finally, letting go of all expectations, a perfect baby arrived for each of them. The gratitude they both found in the gift of their babies led them to assist other women struggling with infertility. This is a beautiful and informative book that will give hope and help to many women.”

Angela Farmer, International Yoga Teacher

“Those who are interested in practicing yoga in the context of their path to parenthood, whether they are yoga novices or long-time practitioners, will find in this book a very easy-to-follow guide to poses, breathing, and relaxation. The photographs and descriptions of poses and sequences are excellent. Also, by including a rationale for each pose, the authors engage the reader in an active understanding of the function of each pose and how it may be helpful during each part of a woman’s cycle. These aspects of the book are excellent, but perhaps the most important quality of the book is that it focuses on the mind-body connection and encourages those seeking fertility support to begin a journey of greater understanding, compassion, and healing for the self. Miracles are not promised, but ‘success’ is viewed as progress along the path of increasing wellness and acceptance, no matter the outcome.”

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Professor, University of Washington
Jill and Lynn would like to dedicate this book to all of our students, past, present and future, and to anyone who has ever faced fertility challenges.
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Yoga and Fertility is an invaluable resource for people trying to conceive; either just beginning to prepare themselves for pregnancy, or for those who have already been trying for some time. Since 2004, I’ve taught the nationally-recognized mind/body program for fertility developed by Alice D. Domar, Ph.D., at Seattle-area fertility clinics. This innovative program focuses on couples who have not been able to conceive or have a history of miscarriage, and features mind/body techniques such as the relaxation response, cognitive restructuring (i.e., dealing with negative thoughts), lifestyle changes, effective communication and self-nurturance.

One of the highlights during this ten-week program is the Yoga for Fertility session taught by Lynn Jensen. Lynn has brought to my students new ways to help them weather the storm of fertility challenges as well as a way to live life to its fullest during this hopeful time.

The practice of yoga is well known as an antidote for stress. Stress is known to have a negative impact on fertility, so learning the relaxation response is very important for women trying to conceive. When teaching the relaxation response, I find that some women have a difficult time calming their bodies and minds in sitting meditation; their thoughts race and their bodies won’t stay still. Yoga is an ideal solution for this problem. Focusing your mind on your body while doing yoga helps to keep you in the present rather than ruminating about the past or worrying about the future. What’s more, it also helps relieve muscle tension that builds up from stress.
During fertility treatment, women often feel little control over their lives and bodies. Doctors tell them when to have sex or literally take over their reproductive cycles with medication and procedures. *Yoga and Fertility* can help women get in touch with their bodies in a positive way using gentle poses that coincide with their cycles. You’ll find in the book that Lynn and Jill have chosen poses, breathing exercises, and meditations geared toward stimulating or supporting the reproductive system and relieving stress. While waiting for that next cycle to begin or during the very stressful two-week wait for the results of your pregnancy test, yoga is fertility treatment you administer yourself.

Research on exercise and fertility supports mild, low impact exercise, such as yoga for fertility or walking, as an effective type of exercise for women who are trying to get pregnant. I recommend yoga and walking to my students as an alternative to more rigorous exercise during this time.

I think you’ll find this book—the only one of its kind to date—to be an important tool to use on your path to parenthood. The extensive knowledge and experience in the field of fertility that Lynn and Jill have is evident in the pages of *Yoga and Fertility*.

What an exciting path you are on, trying to become a parent! I hope that your dreams of building a family are realized soon. *Yoga and Fertility* will offer you a way to do something positive for your mind and body while on your journey to parenthood.

Carol Knoph, MEd, LMHC
Mind/Body Program for Fertility
Peak Health
Seattle, WA
Lynn and Jill Would Like to Thank . . .

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• The many other teachers who have shared their wisdom with me along the way.
• All my family and friends who have been patient with me during the writing process—your support has been invaluable!
JILL’S STORY

I have always loved children and found out very early on that I had an ability to relate to them quite effortlessly. Because of this, I became an elementary school teacher and have worked with children of all different age levels for more than half of my life.

As my career evolved to working more with teachers as a consultant and trainer, my stress level increased considerably. I found that yoga was an antidote to all of the stress I was experiencing in my life, both personally and professionally. I not only started practicing yoga regularly, but got certified as a yoga teacher about three years after trying it for the first time.

I was approaching my mid-thirties and accepted the fact that I may never marry or have children when I met my husband, Dilip, on e-Harmony. To be honest, I was only on e-Harmony to pacify my mother who had heard about it on a daytime talk show. Once Dilip and I spoke on the phone, I knew he would become my husband, and we got married just after my 35th birthday.

We threw away the birth control immediately and started trying to conceive a baby. We both had busy schedules at the time but tried to at least be together during ovulation so that we could get moving on this baby business. After a year of trying with no luck, I went to my OB/GYN who recommended I visit a reproductive
endocrinologist. I’ll never forget that first visit when the doctor told me we were a pretty boring case with just a mild form of PCOS. He was certain that we would get pregnant with some Clomid and an IUI.

I responded well to the medication and everything looked good, but I was not able to get pregnant after three tries of Clomid/IUI. With each failed procedure, I was slipping deeper and deeper into depression. I just couldn’t understand why this was happening to me and why everyone around me seemed to be getting pregnant with ease. Dilip and I started fighting a lot, but kept holding onto our dream of becoming parents. We moved onto IVF and while everything looked good with the treatment, the result was the same as the others; I had not become pregnant. After my second IVF resulted in all of my embryos arresting, I was told that I had poor egg quality. While I didn’t believe this to be the case, I knew that I had had enough with the treatments and trying to have a biological baby.

We sent in our application to the adoption agency a few months after our IVF cycle, and found out that we were pregnant the same day that agency stamped our application. We were beyond excited at this news! While we didn’t share our news with everyone, we announced to it to our close friends and immediate family. We saw the heartbeat on the ultrasound and were so happy that our struggle with infertility was finally over.

About 11 weeks into the pregnancy, I started getting cramps and spotting. I knew what was happening, but kept praying that it wasn’t what I thought it was. I ended up in the emergency room and lost the baby on Mother’s Day of all days. Dilip and I were completely devastated, but were not about to give up our dream of becoming parents. After we grieved this terrible loss, we got back to work on adopting a baby.

While all this was going on, I turned to my yoga and meditation practice daily to help me through the emotional ups and downs that I was going through. I started teaching Fertility Yoga and began leading a support group with RESOLVE, the national infertility organization. Without the support of the women in my group and classes, I’m not sure how I would have survived everything we went through.

Almost a year to the day that we lost our baby, we adopted our beautiful son, Raj. When I saw him for the first time, I knew that the healing had begun and that everything we went through was worth it. I continued to teach Fertility Yoga and lead the support group as I wanted nothing more than to help women who were going through what I had gone through.

It is my hope that this book will offer women some alternative and/or complementary practices as they try to fulfill their dreams of having a baby. I hope that this book will help you feel less isolated and alone if you are having trouble trying to conceive, as that was perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of my own personal journey. Finally, I hope that yoga teachers and others who are not personally trying to conceive may benefit from learning more about the process and how yoga can help prepare the body for the miracle of pregnancy and giving birth and the blessing of becoming a parent.

Namaste,
Jill Petigara
LYNN’S STORY

The table of contents for this book sat in the bottom drawer of my desk for over five years. That it is finally written is evidence to me of the truth of this quote by one of my teacher’s teachers, the late Sufi master, Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan, “If you dedicate yourself to service, the doors will open.” Not that I had purposefully planned to dedicate myself to service. It is just that my life kept moving away from what I had been doing for some years (international management) and moving toward teaching yoga, and specifically, teaching yoga for fertility.

I started doing yoga when I was living in Asia in the mid-1980s. When I returned to the states, it was to attend an MBA program at the University of Washington in Seattle. I continued my yoga practice through the stress of graduate school and as I started a career doing international management for high-tech companies.

As my career continued to advance, I took on responsibility for managing the international sales and marketing for a growing software company, which meant a lot of international travel. I was eventually managing a network of partners in over 40 countries, and a staff that spanned three continents. It was challenging, interesting, exciting, and exhausting. I became an expert in hotel room yoga, airport yoga, and even airplane yoga. I would rush from the airport, just off an 18-hour flight from Singapore, and head straight to yoga class.

In the midst of this, when I was in my early thirties, we decided that we should try to start a family. After trying for nearly two years, we went to a fertility clinic for a check-up. The doctor advised us that we were going to need to be in the same country at least during ovulation, or it wasn’t ever going to work! I was also diagnosed with endometriosis, for which I underwent a six-month drug regimen, followed by a laparoscopic surgery. Neither of these treatments allowed us to achieve a pregnancy.

In retrospect, it is not at all surprising that I did not get pregnant. Working against it were the job stress, the international travel that constantly disrupted my sleep patterns and internal body rhythms, and a very real, although probably not quite conscious, concern about how I was going to work a newborn into my job schedule. After almost five years, and various other medical interventions, I finally started my own consulting business to get control over my travel schedule, and we decided to try IVF. I should probably have given myself time to really de-stress and replenish myself at this point (more on this in Chapter 8), but that is easier to say in hindsight!

We decided ahead of time that we would try up to three rounds of IVF, and after that would pursue adoption. After our first unsuccessful cycle, I had a very strong vision of an Asian-featured baby (neither of us have Asian heritage). Because of the strength of this vision, I began to feel that IVF might not be our path. Still, I agreed to go ahead with the next cycles as we had planned. My yoga practice really helped offset the added stress and added hormones of the IVF process. I noticed that I had fewer of the mood swings and side effects from the medications than others I knew who were going through IVF at the same time. I was disappointed, but not terribly surprised, when our last two IVF cycles also did not work.
We had just started moving forward with paperwork for the adoption process, when we got a call from one of the handful of people in the world who knew what we were doing. He wondered if we were ready to adopt, because he knew of some potential birth parents we might like to meet. “By the way,” he said, “the birth father is Asian.” “OH!” I yelled into the phone. “That IS our baby!” And so, only two months after we let go of our seven-year process of trying to conceive, my infant son was in my arms. And, this many years later, it is absolutely clear that he was the right child, and that he arrived at exactly the right time.

Our experience taught me a couple of essential things. First, it was a lesson in the importance of keeping a strong intention to be parents, but also the importance of not trying to control the details of how that happens. The Universe (or God, or Spirit, or whomever you believe is helping us) needs space to grant our wishes, because we ourselves may not know what the right path is. In the yogic tradition we are counseled to reserve our judgment about what is the “best” way for things to happen, because we are really not able to say, from our surface perspective, what is a “good” thing and what is a “bad” thing. Yogis believe that there is intrinsically good and bad in everything.

The second key thing I learned was the importance of believing in my own intuition. It happened several times during our fertility journey, where I was told things by people who were undisputed experts in their fields, but which didn’t jive with what my own intuition said was true for me. For example, our highly experienced adoption attorney, who was an adoptive parent himself, told us there was a “one in a thousand chance” that our adoption would go through, given what we had told him of the circumstances. In my heart, I knew he was wrong, but my mind bought into the fear that he might be right. This heart-mind conflict was the source of a lot of stress for a few weeks, until it became clear that my intuition was correct, and the adoption would, in fact, go through.

After the sleep-deprivation stage of babyhood was past, I decided I wanted to start a yoga program specifically for women who were trying to conceive. I realized how much I had benefitted from my own yoga practice during my long fertility journey. I also felt (again, in hindsight) that the yoga practice I had been doing perhaps been more strenuous than was helpful. I began to research this, and developed the Yoga for Fertility program that I have been teaching through weekly classes, workshops and retreats since 2002. During this time, I was still running my international consulting business, but I found that when I walked into my office and saw the two different stacks of work, I invariably be drawn to the pile that was yoga related. Thus, my yoga teaching began to grow, and my consulting business began to play second fiddle.

When I first started to think about writing a book on yoga for fertility, I had been teaching the yoga for fertility program for about five years. I wrote the table of contents, did some research, and then the doors began to open. One student’s husband was a publisher and offered to help with my book proposal. Another student was a well-known personality and writer for Time magazine, The Washington Post, and other publications, and offered to
help connect me with publishers. And yet, despite all the support, I didn’t manage to get it written. At the time, in addition to my teaching schedule, I was trying to figure out how to help my son who was really struggling in school (we eventually learned he has dyslexia). I was just unable to devote the energy and time to the book project.

Then, at the beginning of 2011, I realized that I finally had the time and energy available to write the book, and that I really wanted to make it happen. So, I sat down and had a talk with the Universe. I apologized for wasting the resources it offered last time, and promised to go through with the project if it were at all possible to be given a second chance.

Shortly after that, I read an article in The New York Times about Yoga for Fertility, and noticed a quote from Jill Petigara, who was teaching fertility yoga near Philadelphia. A few weeks later, I saw that Jill had given a webcast talk on fertility yoga for RESOLVE, the national infertility organization. Since there were so few people teaching yoga for fertility, I was interested to talk with Jill, and we connected by phone. About three-quarters of an hour into the conversation, Jill said, “I feel funny asking you this, since we have never met, and I’ve only talked with you for 45 minutes, but would you be interested in writing a book with me?” I said, “Well, funny you should ask me that! I just happen to have a table of contents for a book on yoga for fertility sitting in my bottom drawer.”

Jill had received a call from Noreen Henson, Executive Director of Demos Health Publishing, who had seen her quoted in The New York Times, and who was interested in publishing a book on yoga for fertility. Jill was very interested, but with the realities of a full-time job and a two-year-old son, realized she would not be able to do it alone. Thus began our long-distance collaboration on this book. I am extremely grateful to Jill for taking the risk of opening her project to someone else, especially someone she had never met (we did finally meet in person when Jill flew to Seattle for the photo shoot). I am also very grateful to the Universe for giving me a second chance—and this time, also including a co-author and a publisher in the deal, which was a pretty foolproof way to make sure it would happen this time!

From my personal experience as a long-time yoga practitioner and yoga teacher, I firmly believe that yoga benefits us in every aspect of our lives—physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. I hope that the information in this book will help you on the path to parenthood in all of those ways. And, when you do become parents, I know that what you have learned in the process will help you to be the best possible parents, which is the most important job in the world!

Namaste,
Lynn Jensen
What Is Yoga for Fertility?

We are often asked the following questions about yoga for fertility:

- What is yoga for fertility?
- What are its benefits?
- How is it different from other types of yoga?
- Who can benefit from yoga for fertility?

This chapter will address those questions, starting with a look at how yoga can help with fertility. Even using the word “yoga” can imply different things to different people. To many people in the West, yoga means physical poses, or “asanas” that are taught to classes in gyms or yoga studios. Yoga is, in fact, not just physical poses, but a vast body of knowledge that has developed over the past several thousand years, and that continues to develop. The word “yoga” means “union” or “yoke,” which actually refers to the union between humans and the Divine, however the Divine is perceived. In this sense, we could think of yoga as a set of practices undertaken to get oneself more in tune with the Divine. Alternatively, we could think of yoga as a way to remove the barriers that separate us from the underlying energy field that powers the Universe.

This is a useful way to think of yoga when we talk about yoga for fertility. Creating new life is one of the basic themes of the universe. New stars, and even new
galaxies, are created every day. Every species of plant and animal is driven to reproduce itself, in keeping with the laws of the universe. So, at the highest level, yoga for fertility is about learning to tune into those universal laws that govern creativity, fertility, and continuation of the species. The desire to create life is deeply embedded in the human soul. On a more physiological level, we can think of yoga practices as helping us “tune in” to the universal energy field, by reducing our reactivity to stresses, opening energy channels in the body, and calming the mind.

Over about the past fifty years, many different “brands” of yoga have cropped up in the West, which differentiate themselves by emphasizing different combinations of physical poses and sequences, or different approaches to teaching yoga poses. You may have heard of yoga studios offering descriptions of their classes in terms of “hot” yoga, or “power” yoga, or “flow” yoga. Or, you may be familiar with some varieties of yoga such as Ashtanga, Bikram, or Iyengar. But the inventors of these various “brands” are not generally thinking up new yoga poses or practices. Instead, they draw from the extensive repertoire of Hatha yoga poses that has been developed over hundreds, or even thousands of years. Yoga for fertility draws from this same repertoire. These poses and practices were developed to have specific effects on the human body—not only the physical body, but also the mental/emotional and spiritual “bodies.”

### Some General Yoga Benefits

- Increases flexibility and strength
- Improves balance and posture
- Maintains health of joints and spinal discs
- Increases circulation to all body systems, including organs
- Supports the lymphatic system, which is responsible for removal of toxins
- Regulates the endocrine system
- Boosts the immune system
- Improves sleep
- Reduces stress and calms the central nervous system
- Clears the brain; improves memory and the ability to concentrate
- Improves the efficiency and health of the respiratory system
- Increases oxygen to cells and increases red blood cell count
- Slows the aging process due to improved oxygenation of the blood, and detoxification of all systems
- Helps prevent osteoporosis by increasing strength. Yoga helps reduce cortisol levels in the blood stream, stemming the loss of calcium
- Increases overall energy level
- Improves metabolic efficiency, which helps with weight control
- Boosts libido and improves sexual performance
- Improves mood, reduces anxiety, and alleviates depression
- Reduces blood pressure and cholesterol levels
GENERAL YOGA BENEFITS

Yoga as a practice offers an incredible number of benefits to the practitioner. It builds muscular and bone strength, while also improving flexibility, posture and balance. Yoga poses such as twists help to keep joints and spinal discs lubricated, which keeps them working better, longer. Regular yoga practice supports virtually every system in the body, including the circulatory system, the respiratory system, the immune system, the endocrine system, the digestive system, the lymphatic system and the central nervous system. Yoga also helps to regulate bodily processes such as the cyclical rhythms responsible for our sleep/wake cycles, our monthly menstrual cycles, and our internal reactions to the seasons. There are also mental/emotional benefits, such as feelings of calm, non-reactivity to stressors, and mental clarity.

Long-term yoga practitioners usually look younger than they are, because of the constant revitalization that all of these systems receive. They also measure 5 to 10 years younger than their chronological age on physiological tests. From a fertility standpoint, this alone is a good reason to start a yoga practice.

This long list of yoga benefits has been documented by multiple studies, as well as medical practitioners’ observations. One thing has become very clear: the more people who begin to practice yoga, the fewer health problems we will have as a population!

YOGA FOR FERTILITY BENEFITS

The benefits of yoga for fertility include those general benefits of yoga outlined above. What differentiates yoga for fertility as a practice is which poses and practices we choose to do, and sometimes, which we choose not to do. In yoga for fertility, we choose to focus on those poses and practices that specifically help us prepare for ovulation, conception and pregnancy.

The box below lists benefits which are all important aspects of a fertility yoga

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yoga for Fertility Benefits</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Increases energy and blood flow, especially in the heart and pelvic areas</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Stimulates the reproductive system directly by focusing on the ovaries and uterus</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Supports and helps to regulate the endocrine (glandular/hormonal) system</td>
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<td>4. Reduces levels of stress hormones in the bloodstream</td>
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<td>5. Adapts poses according to the phase of the woman’s monthly cycle</td>
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<td>6. Calms the mind and reduces negative thinking</td>
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<td>7. Opens a two-way communication channel between mind and body</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Uses yoga, meditation, and visualization to help synchronize messages between the conscious mind, the subconscious mind, and the body</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Balances feminine/masculine or yin/yang energy in the body</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Increases “apana,” or the downward-flowing energy in the body and “samana,” the digestive and absorptive energy in the body</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. Builds life-force energy in the body</td>
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practice. In order to understand more about how these can help enhance fertility, let’s look at each benefit in greater detail.

1. INCREASES ENERGY AND BLOOD FLOW

If we want the glands and organs of the pelvis (including the ovaries, uterus, and Fallopian tubes) to be healthy and functioning at their maximum effectiveness, we need to supply them with a continuous flow of nutrient- and oxygen-rich blood. While it is the job of the heart to keep blood pumping around the body, we can help or hinder the heart in its mission to get fresh blood to all parts of the body. If we are holding a lot of tension in the pelvis, the blood vessels can become constricted, cutting down the flow to key organs. If we spend a large part of our day sitting, the blood can tend to stagnate in the pelvic area, thus “starving” the pelvic organs of the nutrients they should be receiving from a continuously refreshed blood flow.

Energy flow, while perhaps not as obvious as blood flow, is equally important from the yogic point of view. If energy flow is a new concept to you, it may help to think of having an energy system, similar to the circulatory system, in our bodies. In the yoga tradition, the vessels or channels in this system are called “nadis.” This is similar to the concept of “chi” in Chinese medicine. The nadis serve to move fresh energy to all parts of the body, similar to the way that arteries move fresh blood. In our discussion of potentially tension-holding spots such as the pelvis and heart areas, we can imagine that anything that restricts the flow of blood may also restrict the flow of energy to a particular area.

Surprisingly, the pelvis is one of the key tension-holding areas in the body, although we rarely notice it as much as we might notice tension in the shoulders or neck. We can end up with pelvic tension for different reasons. Sometimes it results from physical exercise such as running, walking, hiking, soccer, biking, or other exercise that strengthens but also tightens the pelvic muscles. Sometimes we hold tension in the pelvis that has to do with a previous life trauma centered in the pelvis, such as sexual abuse, past abortions or miscarriages, injuries or diseases. In yoga, we regard the pelvis as not only the center of reproduction, but also as the center of creative endeavors of any sort. So, we could be holding tension in the pelvis as a result of being unable to express ourselves creatively in our lives. Tami Lynn Kent, in her book “Wild Feminine” says essentially that we stuff lots of things that are difficult to deal with in the pelvic area.1 Whatever the reason for the pelvic tension, releasing that tension is one of the important benefits of yoga for fertility.

The need for blood and energy to move through the heart area may seem less clearly related to fertility, at least from the Western point of view, which tends to compartmentalize the body. However, from the Eastern point of view, the heart area is very much related to the ability to conceive. One of the key tenets of fertility from the Chinese medicine point of view is that the “heart-to-uterus energy channel” must be open in order for conception to occur. In the same way that the pelvic area can hold tension, the heart area (often referred to as the “heart center” or the “heart chakra” in yoga) can become tight and closed, restricting the flow of blood and energy.
What causes this closing down of the heart center? Once again, the culprit can be physical practices or emotional stresses. Physically, our posture and our daily activities can impact the heart center. If we spend much of our day hunched over a computer or a steering wheel, we are likely to be rounding forward and physically collapsing the heart center. Emotional stresses on the heart can include any experience where we feel betrayed or where we have suffered a loss. Dealing with fertility challenges can certainly stress the heart as we suffer a loss of our dream of pregnancy month after month. In addition, we sometimes feel as though our body has betrayed us by not doing what we always expected it to be able to do. Opening the heart center to increased blood and energy flow is another important benefit of yoga for fertility.

2. STIMULATES THE REPRODUCTIVE SYSTEM

In fertility yoga routines, we choose yoga poses which have the specific effect of bringing extra blood flow to the abdominal area, providing additional stimulation for the ovaries, uterus, and other abdominal organs. Some of these poses, such as legs-up-the-wall pose, provide this stimulation by positioning the body so that extra blood flows to the abdominal area. Other poses, such as locust pose, provide alternating compression and release to the low belly area. The result is that during the compression part of the pose, organs are compressed and old blood is squeezed out. During the release, the organs and glands in the low belly get a fresh, new supply of blood, flooding them with more oxygen and nutrients. These are a few examples of how we can use particular yoga poses to direct more blood flow to a specific area of the body.

3. SUPPORTS AND REGULATES THE ENDOCRINE SYSTEM

The endocrine system includes all of the glands in the body. The proper functioning of the endocrine system is absolutely critical to fertility. Scientists and doctors are continually discovering additional ways in which the endocrine system impacts and controls key aspects of the reproductive process. A few glands, such as the ovaries and thyroid gland, have for a long time been clearly implicated in fertility problems. If they are not working properly, the ovaries may not be ovulating at the right time, or may not be ovulating at all. If the thyroid gland is either a tiny bit underactive or overactive, fertility suffers. In fact, if any gland in the endocrine system is out of balance, it can have a negative impact on fertility. One of our key goals in yoga for fertility is to help regulate the endocrine system so that each gland is working as effectively and efficiently as possible.

Fortunately for us, yoga is innately designed to work on the endocrine system. If you superimpose a map of the endocrine system onto a map of the key yogic energy centers (called chakras), you will find that they line up nicely. Although yoga was developed long before the endocrine system was described by Western medicine, it was designed to work on the chakras, which the sages perceived to be very important energy centers in the body. Western medicine has since confirmed this by furthering our understanding of the important role the endocrine system plays in all aspects of health.
The good news is that every yoga pose we do in any yoga class is working on at least one or more of the glands in the endocrine system. In yoga for fertility, we may choose poses that target specific glands, such as the ovaries, thyroid, or adrenal glands in order to specifically support regulation of those glands.

4. REDUCES STRESS HORMONE LEVELS

One of the most widely recognized benefits of yoga is its role in stress reduction. Numerous studies have shown it to be effective in reducing stress in a broad range of populations, such as in cancer patients and veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder. There is no question that ongoing fertility challenges are stress-producing. A famous study by Dr. Alice Domar at the Harvard Medical School documented that the anxiety and depression levels of women facing fertility challenges was on par with the levels of people who had been diagnosed with terminal diseases.2

Stress, whether due to our jobs, our relationships, our life situations, or fertility challenges, can negatively impact our ability to become pregnant. When we are under stress, our adrenal glands pump so-called “stress hormones,” such as adrenaline and cortisol, into our bloodstream. The role of these hormones is to activate the sympathetic nervous system. This starts certain physiological changes happening in the body, which are supposed to prepare us to deal with the stressful situation.

This combination of physiological responses has been called “the fight-or-flight response.” The adrenal glands are supposed to react to short-term danger by preparing the body to either fight or take flight, and they do a good job of this. All of these physiological changes would be very useful if we were being attacked by a saber-tooth tiger! However, when we are under continuous stress, the adrenal glands continue to pump out stress hormones, hour after hour. Now, the physiological changes are not so helpful. Particularly if we are trying to get pregnant, we do NOT want the blood flow to the core organs restricted, nor do we want shallow breathing. We are robbing the uterus and ovaries of the rich blood flow and oxygen they require to function optimally.

Physiological Changes Associated with the “Fight-or-Flight” Response

- Breathing becomes shallower and more rapid
- Blood vessels in the core of the body restrict
- Heart beats rapidly, rushing blood to the arms and legs
- Blood pressure increases
- Muscles tense
- Adrenal glands secrete stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline
- Brain goes on hyper-alert
- Hypothalamus releases endorphins, which are the body’s natural pain-killers
- Immune system is depressed
- Digestive system shuts down
Recalibrating the body’s reaction to stress is one of our key goals in yoga for fertility. While we may not be able to remove all the stressors from our lives, we can effectively reduce our reaction to stress events. This, in turn, will minimize stress hormone levels in the bloodstream. We can do this by eliciting the “relaxation response,” a term coined by cardiologist Dr. Herbert Benson in the late 1960s. Yoga and meditation are particularly effective in eliciting the relaxation response. They activate the parasympathetic nervous system, allowing the body to reverse the physiological effects of the fight-or-flight response, and instead activating the relaxation response. Interestingly, the hypothalamus gland, which mediates the relaxation response, also regulates all aspects of reproduction.3

Physiological Changes Associated with the Relaxation Response

• Heart rate decreases
• Blood pressure lowers
• Breathing rate slows
• Oxygen consumption decreases
• Level of stress hormones in bloodstream drops
• Reduction in muscle tension and constriction
• Blood returns to core organs
• Changes brainwaves to calmer, slower patterns

In our experience with the women in our classes, the relaxation aspect of yoga alone is extremely important. Most of our students are busy career women with demanding jobs. Usually, a few students in each class already have a child at home, and are now working as well as being a mother, while trying to conceive again. Having a time set aside to just focus on themselves, where they can relax deeply, is so valuable.

A few years ago, at the end of the initial class in a new session, one of the students came up to me with tears in her eyes, and said, “I didn’t realize until now that I really have not relaxed for at least the past year. Thank you!”

5. ADAPTS POSES ACCORDING TO THE MONTHLY CYCLE

The function of each portion of a woman’s monthly cycle is specific to that part of the cycle. So, in yoga for fertility we tailor the poses accordingly. In the first half of the cycle leading up to ovulation, the most important focus is on stimulating the ovaries to produce follicles and release a high-quality egg. We would also like to ensure that the uterus is developing a thick, lush lining. So, in the first half of the cycle, we choose yoga poses which bring stimulation to the area of the ovaries and improve blood flow to the uterus. In the second half of the cycle, post-ovulation, we are interested in supporting implantation. Thus, we choose yoga poses that are a bit less stimulating, and more supportive and calming. During menstruation, our main objective is to rest the body and support the movement of blood out of the uterus.

This is one of the reasons that we suggest following the yoga for fertility routines if you are trying to conceive, even if you are already doing a regular yoga practice. It is best to tailor the routine to where you are in your cycle. Other considerations for your practice, if you are attending another yoga class, are discussed in Chapter 6.
6. CALMS THE MIND AND REDUCES NEGATIVE THINKING

One of the concepts we teach in yoga for fertility classes is the practice of having both the body and the mind present during yoga practice. We ask our students to try to “be present” in the yoga class. This is essentially just practice focusing on what we are doing; i.e., to have the body and mind engaged in the same thing at the same time. This may sound like an unusual thing to practice, but the truth is that we rarely have our mind fully present with what our body is doing.

Think of the last time you drove to the grocery store. Were you thinking “Here I am, sitting in the car with my hands on the steering wheel?” Unlikely! Your mind was probably already at your destination, figuring out what you needed to buy, and possibly even thinking about what you were going to do after you finished shopping!

Yet, there are some very good reasons to cultivate having the mind and body in the same place at the same time. Of course, one reason is that you will probably do a better job of what you are doing (like driving!) if you are actually thinking about it. But from the fertility perspective, the most important reason is that it reduces stress. Most of our stress does not come from what is happening right at this moment. Ninety-eight percent of the time our stress comes from things that happened in the past, or things that we are afraid might happen in the future.

In yoga, we talk about the “monkey mind” that runs around back and forth. It pulls things from the past to stress over, and from the future to worry about, and generally gets into mischief. It often tries to drag you back to the same stressful scenario over and over. Being present helps to control the “monkey mind,” but it takes practice. You may want to start by trying to

Study Finds Happiness Linked to Where the Mind Is

A pair of Harvard psychologists recently carried out a study on happiness. The study used a smartphone application to check in with a number of individuals at various times during the day, over a period of a few weeks. Each time, the individuals were asked to respond to several questions, such as:

1. What are you doing?
2. What are you thinking about?
3. How are you feeling?

At the end of the study, the researchers compiled the responses. The study found that 47% of the time, people were thinking about something other than what they were doing. The researchers concluded that a main cause of people’s unhappiness is how frequently their minds wander. What they found was that the people who reported feeling happiest were those who were thinking about what they were doing. These people were even happier than those who were thinking about some positive thing, like being on the beach in Hawaii!
stay present in your yoga practice as you do the routines in this book. Do not be discouraged if your own “monkey mind” runs off somewhere else every few minutes or even every few seconds. Usually the “monkey mind” has had a lot of practice getting into trouble, and does not take kindly to being brought under control!

7. TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION BETWEEN MIND AND BODY

One big advantage of being present in your yoga practice is that it makes it possible to get messages and feedback from the body to the brain. In other words, it allows information from the body to be brought to your conscious awareness. The requirement for this, of course, is that your brain is paying attention to what your body is doing. Unfortunately, our mind-body communication channel often works only in one direction: mind-to-body. Our minds are used to telling the body what to do, and having the body obey without complaint.

For example, imagine you are sitting at your computer working on a report that is due tomorrow morning. Your neck and shoulders say, “Ouch, this is too long in this position! Please get up and stretch! We are hurting!” But what is your response? It is likely that you ignore this message altogether, because you have a report that needs to be finished. If you were to tune into the body and really use two-way mind-body communication, you would probably get up and stretch. And you would likely find that your brain worked better after you stretched, since you released the blockages to the blood flowing into the brain. Thus, you would be more efficient in finishing your report.


Yoga helps us access wisdom and information that resides in the body that we may be aware of on a subconscious level, but that our conscious mind has not noticed. This is particularly important in yoga for fertility. During the process of trying to conceive, we are often required to notice what is happening in our bodies and make decisions based on that information. Am I about to ovulate? Am I feeling different than I did last month? Is my period on the way? How is this medication affecting me? Is this a good month for us to try, or to take a break? The more we are able to tune into our body’s messages, the more likely it is that we will make appropriate and effective decisions.

9. BALANCES ENERGY IN THE BODY

According to Eastern philosophy, everyone is made up of a combination of feminine and masculine energy. Ideally, the two are at an optimum ratio and balance each other, although people with perfectly balanced energy are exceedingly rare. A graphic representation of this concept of opposite energies balancing is the ancient Chinese symbol for Yin (feminine) and Yang (masculine).

The Yang (masculine) energy is considered to be the more action-oriented, “hot” energy, and is also represented by the sun. The Yin (feminine) energy is the more intuitive, contemplative, “cool” energy, and is considered to be the “moon”
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fertility is not so much to strengthen the body, as to strengthen the central nervous system. We want to train the body to cope better with stress. We want to supply the organs and glands with more blood flow and oxygen, rather than rob them to supply the extremities for an intensive yoga practice. We want to bring up the Yin energy in the body, as this is the energy that is more conducive to conception and motherhood.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPES OF YOGA AND THEIR USEFULNESS FOR FERTILITY SUPPORT</th>
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<td>Generally supportive of fertility</td>
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<td>Yoga for fertility</td>
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Notes:

1. In order to make these lists, we had to generalize based on what we have observed being done in “standard” classes of the various types. There may be, for example, some gentle yoga classes that are not so great for fertility, and some flow yoga classes that do many supportive fertility poses. And this is not to say that one cannot get pregnant doing the yoga practices in Column 2. But on the whole, we would recommend yoga classes in Column 1, before those in Column 2, for anyone trying to conceive.

2. There is a type of yoga called “Yin Yoga,” which you may have heard of; however, the philosophy of this type of yoga is different than what we are talking about here with focus on a Yin practice.

3. In Chapter 6, we will talk about some basic ways you can modify your practice if you are attending another yoga class, to make it more “fertility friendly.”

### 10. INCREASES APAŅA AND SAMANA

The yoga picture of the body recognizes five energy currents that represent the flow of life-force energies. Two of these currents, the apana and samana, are especially important to support fertility. Apana helps with elimination, and as such supports a healthy menstrual cycle. It also aids in the removal of toxins, which could impact fertility if stuck in the body. Samana supports the digestive and respiratory processes so that our bodies can make efficient use of the food we eat and the air we breathe to nourish our bodies. Specific yoga poses increase apana and samana, and these poses are included in
the yoga for fertility routines we offer in the following chapters.

11. BUILDS LIFE-FORCE ENERGY (PRANA) IN THE BODY

Yoga recognizes prana as the spark of life, the vitality that permeates all the cells of the body and essentially makes us alive. You might think about prana like the charge in a battery. When it runs down, our bodies, our health, and even our emotional lives don’t work so well. The quantity of prana that we have impacts the quality of our lives and our health. Prana is very important for conception. It makes sense that, in order to create new life, we need to have a good store of life-force energy to begin with.

Unfortunately, our modern lifestyles tend to drain us of prana, rather than build it. Many times we are in a “prana-deficit” when we decide to try to conceive. Things that drain prana include general stress, a cluttered, chaotic living or working environment, negative people, traffic, pollution, poor diet, overly strenuous exercise, job stress, relationships, etc. In fact, many of the things that we may have to deal with on a daily basis can deplete our stores of prana. A regular, daily yoga for fertility practice is a good way to replenish and increase prana. The practice of hatha yoga postures, pranayama (yogic breathing techniques) and the use of mantras, meditation, and visualization all help to build more of this life-force energy. Other ways you can build prana include eating whole, non-processed, nutritious foods, taking a long walk in nature, or singing, chanting or meditating.