

Women's Life Cycles

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Ancient yogis taught publicly to boys and men. Today, more women than men around the world, especially in the West, practice yoga in group classes. Women are making discoveries about the asanas and sequences and determining how they affect a woman's body and her rhythms and cycles.

pms, menses,
menopause,
pregnancy,
postpartum



Rhythms and Cycles of a Woman's Body

In each stage of a woman's life, especially in menses, prenatal, and menopause; empower women to listen to their inner wisdom, honor their intuition, and have them do what is best for them.

A regular yoga practice can help to regulate the hormonal system of the body. According to Indra Devi (May 12, 1899 - April 25, 2002-disciple of Sri Tirumalai Krishnamacharya , and herself a renowned yoga teacher), half and full shoulderstands (Salamba Sarvangasana) are the most important postures for correcting imbalances or hormonal problems in a woman's reproductive cycle.

A woman's reproductive organs

Vagina – *Yoni* is the Sanskrit word for vagina – meaning *The Source*, Cervix, Cervical canal, Uterus, Endometrium, Fallopian Tubes, Fimbriae , and Ovaries

At the time a young woman's body goes through puberty, she begins a monthly menstruation cycle (period or menses).

Menstruation is a normal and natural cycle in a woman's life. It can occur on average starting around 12 years of age, and refers to the years of a woman's life when she has the ability to conceive and carry a child, and is the start of the reproduction cycle. Menstruating, like puberty, is associated with shifts in hormones. Menstruation is the monthly bleed a woman experiences and is often called "the time of the month". The fluctuation in hormones brings about some physical and psychological symptoms.

Terminology

PMS / PMT Premenstrual syndrome (PMS) is also known as Premenstrual Tension (PMT). It is a term used to describe a cluster of symptoms a woman may experience in the lead up to and during her period. Approximately 90 percent of women experience PMS symptoms every month before their period. Symptoms usually start to disappear with the onset of bleeding.

MENSTRUATION Menstruation is the monthly bleed a woman experiences which first starts at puberty and ends with menopause. It is known as TOM (Time of the Month) or periods.

IRREGULAR PERIODS (Oligomenorrhea) Irregular periods are most common in the 5 years after menarche and again in perimenopausal women approaching menopause. In both instances irregularities are caused by hormone imbalances. Occasionally irregular periods can occur in women of any age due to external factors such as extreme dieting or exercise, stress or eating disorders.

HEAVY PERIODS (Menorrhagia) Prolonged heavy periods do not necessarily cause a problem unless they lead to embarrassing leakages or cause anemia because of excessive blood loss.

ABSENCE OF PERIODS (Amenorrhea) The most common reason for missed periods is pregnancy. Amenorrhea however is the absence of menstruation in non-pregnant women. In most cases amenorrhea is not a cause for concern; it can be prompted by stress, excessive exercise, illness or extreme weight loss.

PAINFUL PERIODS (Dysmenorrhea) Primary dysmenorrhea is defined as painful periods involving cramps and darting pains in the lower abdomen which radiate down the hips, thighs and around the back. Other common symptoms include nausea, constipation and/or diarrhea . Secondary dysmenorrhea is when pain



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associated with periods is caused by another condition such as PID, uterine fibroids, endometriosis or ovarian cysts. Treatment requires treating the underlying disorder.

BREAKTHROUGH BLEEDING (Metrorrhagia) Breakthrough bleeding is when a woman has another bleed (or spotting) between menstrual cycles.

Yoga for PMS

Leading up to the beginning of menses, premenstrual symptoms may be experienced.

PMS (premenstrual syndrome) or PMT (premenstrual tension) may involve some symptoms of swelling/bloating, headaches and mood changes over one to two weeks before a period. Younger women can also suffer but it affects some women in their 40s more severely. Not all women experience the same combination of symptoms and the symptoms can range from mild to severe. Symptoms include: tiredness, bloating, fluid retention, depression, sleep disturbances, food cravings, reduced libido, lower back pain, headaches, nausea, and breast tenderness. Because some of the same hormones are involved, many of these symptoms also are early signs of pregnancy.

Yoga practice: Slow down, and include hip openers, forward bends, deep breathing, and meditation. If tendency is towards breast tenderness, bloating or cramping, include restorative backbending

Yoga for Menstruation

The menstrual cycle has four phases: By Ulyana Michailov ND (Ulyana Michailov is a naturopath and acupuncturist from Adelaide, Australia. She also holds qualifications in herbal medicine, nutrition, and traditional Chinese medicine)

1. Follicular: According to Ayurveda, the follicular stage is when Kapha is most active. The pituitary gland releases follicle-stimulating hormone (FSH), which develop follicles (groups of cells that contain immature eggs). Follicles produce the hormone estrogen, which causes the lining of the uterus (endometrium) to become thick in preparation for the possible embedding of a fertilized egg.

2. Ovulation: The ovulation stage right up until menstruation is Vata predominant. The rise in estrogen during the follicular phase leads to the secretion of the gonadotropin-releasing hormone (GnRH). This in turn increases the pituitary gland's production of both the luteinizing hormone (LH) and FSH. The abrupt rise in the LH triggers ovulation, which releases the egg from the ovary. The egg is swept into the fallopian tube and moved along towards the uterus. If fertilization does not occur the egg will disintegrate over the next 6 to 24 hours.

3. Luteal: This phase the corpus luteum releases large amounts of progesterone and minimal estrogen. These hormones contribute to the further thickening and maintenance of the lining of the uterus. If fertilization does not occur the corpus luteum breaks down and progesterone levels decline, which degrades the lining of the uterus.

This is the phase many women may experience physical and emotional changes including tender or lumpy breasts, fluid retention, bloating, mood swings, tiredness or anxiety; known as premenstrual tension.

4. Menstruation: The bleeding stage is considered Pitta predominant. Menstruation occurs when the broken down lining of the uterus sheds and lasts generally from 3 to 7 days. The length can also differ from one cycle to the... next. The first day of bleeding is considered to be the first day of the menstrual cycle. It is at this time of the month, if everything is healthy, balanced and in order that a woman is her most intuitive and reflective. If she is out of balance then she can struggle emotionally and physically.

Most schools of yoga tend to agree that Inverted poses should not be practiced during menstruation.

(note: in cases of fibroid cysts, inverted poses during menstruation may be recommended) Women may choose to rest or do a restorative and/or supported asana yoga practice during this time. During active menstruation, a practice of gentle supported forward bends and restorative practices is recommended by some and to try and avoid a more strenuous standing, backbending, and balancing practice. Geeta Iyengar of Yoga a Gem for Women (1990), "Under no circumstances should Salamba Sirsasana and Salamba Sarvangasana be performed," and also states "...complete

rest is advisable...Normal practice may be resumed from the fourth or fifth day.” The Women’s Book of Yoga: Asana & Pranayama for All Phases of the Menstrual Cycle (2007), states that the menstrual flow can reverse and that “Since the menstrual process is one of discharge, it is a commonsense precaution to avoid these poses.” Menstruation is a time for cleansing and the energy is apana (downward), though doing poses, especially inverted postures will not reverse the flow. A student may or may not notice any effect of their practice on their cycle. Each student should make their own personal wisdom decision about their practice during menstruation based on how they feel.

Inversions and Menstruation <http://www.yogajournal.com/basics/831> -*Why are women not supposed to do inverted poses during their menstrual cycle?* **Barbara Benagh's reply: —Kathleen Heitler, California**

First of all, there is no consensus on whether to avoid inversions during a woman's menstrual cycle. The two opinions are basically divided between those who think that no women should practice inversions during menstruation and those who feel the choice varies from woman to woman.

Those who encourage a ban on inversions cite fears that certain physical problems may arise. Until recently, increased risk of endometriosis was considered the most common risk. But since more is known now about that disease, the idea has been debunked. There is also a theory that inversions may cause "vascular congestion" in the uterus resulting in excessive menstrual flow. (For more info, [click here](#).) If true, this risk is probably most relevant for women who hold inversions a long time. Some teachers say that since a woman's energy is low during menstruation, high-energy poses such as inversions should be avoided. This makes sense, yet not all women experience low energy during menstruation; indeed, many feel quite energized.

*Philosophically speaking, menstruation is considered to be apana, meaning that energetically, its vitality is downward-flowing. The argument against inversions during menstruation maintains that inversions will disturb this natural energetic flow. However, inversions are recommended in some systems of yoga as therapy to improve elimination of excess apana. In *Yoga: The Path to Holistic Health*, B.K.S. Iyengar recommends practicing inversions to alleviate menstrual problems such as heavy flow and irregular periods.*

*The contradictions don't stop there. Some teachers recommend avoidance of inversions such as **Sirsasana (Headstand)** and **Sarvangasana (Shoulderstand)** while suggesting no such caution with other poses that invert the uterus, such as **Uttanasana (Standing Forward Bend)** and Downward-Facing Dog.*

Since I know of no studies or research that makes a compelling argument to avoid inversions during menstruation, and since menstruation affects each woman differently and can vary from cycle to cycle, I am of the opinion that each woman is responsible for making her own decision. Pay attention to how you respond to inversions (indeed, ALL asanas) during your period. A short Headstand may be fine while a longer one isn't; maybe you will find that backbends or twists adversely affect your period. If your energy is very low, restorative poses may be just the ticket, though you may find a more active sequence of standing poses alleviates cramps and the blues. You really won't know what works and what doesn't until you feel it in your own body.

*The bottom line is that **hatha yoga** is full of contradictions and varied opinions, leaving each of us ultimately responsible for our own choices. Pay attention to your body and discover what works and what doesn't—not just during your period but every day.*

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Relieve bleeding in between normal periods and/or period “trailers”

Seated wide angle pose – Upavista Konasana

Seated and Lying down supported bound angle pose – Baddha Konasana / Supta Baddha Konasana

Belly Bolster – apply pressure to the belly with fists, blanket roll, pillow

Painful Periods – belly breathing – Supta Baddha Konasana (hips not elevated)

For cramping try alternating between sitting forward bends (squeezing of abdominal area) and gentle backbends (increasing circulation/blood flow)

Absence of Periods (not related to pregnancy)– If feeling overwhelmed, try a practice of restorative poses and for balancing the endocrine system, try a practice of inversions, backbends, agni sara, and twists – also good for **Irregular Periods** – when not menstruating

Headstand –Sirsasana and Shoulderstand –Salamba Sarvangasana are recommended by BKS Iyengar and daughter, Geeta Iyengar, after every menstrual period to ensure an inner dryness once the bleeding has stopped.

For Extreme Tiredness During Periods – Lie over a bolster with buttocks up and head down

Place a bolster vertically on a table or height. Lie back over it with feet firmly on the floor

Reclining Hero's Pose-Supta Virasana – opens belly, soaks organs

Reclining Bridge – Supta Bandha – calming, helps pelvic discomfort

For Fatigue in the Head During Periods – Downward facing dog-Adho Mukha Savanasana-

hanging from a rope and head supported on a block

Standing forward fold-Uttanasana-with head resting on a chair or bench

Forward bends followed by bound angle – Baddha Konasana

Menstrual yoga from *The Way of the Happy Woman(2011)*

Do yin or restorative yoga on the first few days of your cycle. Avoid standing poses, inversions, and strong practices in general. Gentle chest openers can feel really nice too. Don't do any strong breathing practices or core strengthening. Your womb and belly need to feel relaxed and open to encourage the downward, purifying flow of your menstrual stream. Take more time for meditation to tap into the strong intuitive prompts that are available to you now.

Sequence for Healthy Menstruation – *The Woman's Book of Yoga & Health(2002)*

(supported with bolster)

Reclining Bound Angle Pose – Supta Baddha Konasana

Child's pose – Balasana supported

Head-on/to-knee pose – Janu Sirsasana - supported

Three limb intense stretch – Triang Mukhaikapada Paschimottanasana – supported

Seated forward bend – Paschimottanasana – supported

Wide angle seated pose – Upavistha Konasana

Wide angle seated pose with twist – Parsva Upavistha Konasana – supported

Wide angle seated pose with center fold - Upavistha Konasana – supported

Inverted staff pose- Viparita Dandasana – supported with bolsters and chair

Bridge pose – Setu Bandha Sarvangasana –supported

Corpse pose - Savasana

Sequence for Easing Menstrual Discomfort – *Yoga Sequencing(2012)pg. 246-247*

Reclining Bound Angle Pose –Supta Baddha Konasana

Wind Relieving Pose – Apanasana

Happy Baby Pose –Ananda Balasana

Hand to Big Toe Pose -Supta Padangusthasana

Reclining Hero's Pose – Supta Virasana

Cat/Cow Table – Bidaldasana

Downward Facing Dog Pose – Adho Mukha Svanasana

Bridge Pose – Setu Bandha Sarvangasana

Lying Down Twist – Supta Parivartanasana

Cow Faced Posture – Gomukhasana

Wide Angle Forward Fold Pose – Upavista Konasana

Seated Forward Bend Pose – Paschimottanasana

Legs up the wall Pose – Viparita Karani

Yoga to Promote Fertility

Infertility is inability to become pregnant after a year or more of trying. Have the students nurture themselves with reviewing diet, frequent baths, massages, naps, down-time and restorative yoga to reduce stress. A dynamic asana practice of inversion, backbends, and twists many help to release

the energy in the pelvis to create more prana and vitality in the reproductive organs. Yoga on its own can help support reproduction and fertility and with a supportive lifestyle can be integrated with infertility treatments like IVF (in vitro fertilization) for a more successful result.

Postures that strengthen the pelvic floor and core muscles, inversions (especially handstand and shoulderstand), twisting postures, abdominal breathing techniques and postures that are restorative are the focus for improving fertility (making sure to keep the belly soft throughout the practice – do not let the belly harden)

Poses for Fertility – Yoga as Medicine, Timothy McCall, MD(2007)

Pelvic Awareness Exercise - Cat/Cow

Abdominal Breathing

Standing forward bend – uttanasana

Extended side angle pose – Utthita Parsvakonasana

Pigeon – eka pada rajakapotasana

Bound angle – baddha konasana and supported bound angle – supta baddha konasana

Wide legged seated forward bend – upavistha konasana

Head to knee pose – janu Sirsasana

Supported bridge pose – Setu Bandha Sarvangasana

Legs up the wall pose – Viparita Karani

Specific sequence to promote fertility to do for 6 months with no other postures. Effects of these poses would be lost if more active poses are done or if the belly goes hard in any posture. Belly should remain soft during the entire practice.

Handstand-Adho Mukha Vrksasana- to draw blood flow to belly

Downward facing dog – Adho Mukha Savanasana – with head on a block

Reclining Hero's Pose – Supta Virasana

Salamba Shalambasana – Shoulderstand

Plow Pose – Supported Halasana –thighs resting on a chair

Bridge – Supported Setu Bandha Sarvangasana – pelvis supported by block, bench, bolster, or pelvic sling

Reclining Bound Angle – Supta Baddha Konasana – with bolster or blanket stack behind the torso

Legs up the wall – Viparita Karani

Yoga for Pregnancy & Postpartum– see separate training packets

Yoga for Menopause

Terminology

MENOPAUSE is the final menstrual period, confirmed after 12 consecutive months without a period or when the ovaries are removed or permanently damaged.

SPONTANEOUS MENOPAUSE (sometimes called natural menopause) is menopause that is not caused by any medical treatment or surgery. It occurs, on average, at age 51.

PERIMENOPAUSE the transitional time of 6 – 10 years immediately prior to natural menopause when changes begin, plus 1 year after menopause. The menses go through an irregular cycle.

INDUCED MENOPAUSE menopause caused by a medical or surgical intervention prior to a woman's reaching natural menopause that removes or seriously damages both ovaries.

EARLY MENOPAUSE spontaneous or induced menopause that occurs well before the typical age of natural menopause (51).

PREMATURE MENOPAUSE spontaneous or induced menopause that occurs at or before age 40.

POSTMENOPAUSE is all the years beyond menopause.

Menopause is a normal and natural cycle in a woman's life. It can occur on average around 51 years of age, and refers to the final years of a woman's life when she has missed her periods for 12 consecutive months and is the end of the reproduction cycle. Menopause, like puberty, is associated with shifts in hormones. Menopause brings about the end of monthly menstruation and is often called "the change of life", and with good reason, as it coincides with other life changes. The fluctuation in hormones and the final very low levels of hormones usually bring about some physical and psychological symptoms. One of the most common symptoms is to experience uncomfortable hot flushes and night sweats. The second common symptom is vaginal dryness. Not all women experience the same combination of symptoms and some may have none. Other symptoms may include: urinary problems, aching joints, headaches, dry mouth, weight gain, mood swings, sleep disturbances, depression, panic attacks, a change in libido, stress incontinence and changes in life priorities. A very good resource book is Christine Northrup's "The Wisdom of Menopause."

Osteoporosis and Menopause - Osteoporosis, sometimes called brittle bones, is a condition associated with menopause and old age. Even though both men and women start to lose calcium from their bones as they get older, this process is accelerated in women at the time of menopause when some women may lose it more quickly as their estrogen levels drop. This calcium loss results in loss in bone strength, making them weaker and more brittle, most crucially at the spine, the hip and the wrist. A balanced yoga practice of standing, weight bearing poses, inverted, seated and lying down postures; helps to strengthen bone and helps to improve balance, coordination, posture, and body mechanics. Caution to those students already with osteoporosis, use props generously, pay special attention to proper alignment, and extra caution to forward bends which may put pressure on already weakened vertebrae.

Menopause Practice Guide

Students may choose to avoid heat building yoga practices (Bikram, sun salutations, hot yoga, agni sara (deep contractions of the abdomen and pelvic floor).

Standing forward bend with bottom against a wall (wall hang) –Uttanasana

** (option add head support prop with blocks)

Dog pose – Adho Mukha svanasana –hanging from a strap and/or with head supported

** (experienced students can practice headstand-Sirsasana and its variations and shoulderstand – salamba sarvangasana and its variations)

Wide legged standing forward fold – Prasarita Padottanasana

Supported lying down bound angle pose – Supta baddha konasana

Supported legs up the wall pose – Viparita Karani

Supported half plow pose –ardha Halasana (with blankets and chair)

Supported bridge pose – setu bandha sarvangasana (lying back on bolsters or blankets)

Supported hero's pose - supta virasana

Supported child's pose – Balasana

Lying down bent knee twist – apanasana twist

** (if comfortable in seated forward bends can add in supported seated forward bends)

Supported deep relaxation pose – savasana

Perimenopause – to help regulate the menstrual cycle

Lying back over a chair

Upside down bow pose over a chair

AYURVEDIC-Perimenopause and the Doshas: During perimenopause, vatas are more likely to become irritable and impatient. Hot flashes are more likely in pitta. Kapha may become withdrawn, emotional, and needy. Depression can happen in all three doshas.

Menopause – Cooling

Lying down bound angle pose - Supta Baddha Konasana

Plow pose - Halasana

Reclining angle pose -Supta Konasana

Reclining Hero's Pose - Supta Virasana

Fish - Matsyendrasana

Sitali pranayama (breathing in through tongue “straw” and out through the nose)

Menopause – Balancing

Lying down bound angle pose - Supta Baddha Konasana

Supported bridge pose - Supported Setu bandha sarvangasana

Supta Konasana

Reduce Hot Flashes

Lying back over a chair

Supported Bridge Pose – setu bandha sarvangasana

Forward bends and legs up the wall – Viparita Karani

Meditation

Calm the mind and nervous system

Forward bends – Uttanasana

Mood Swings, Sleep Disturbances

Meditation

Nadi Shodana pranayama – (alternate nostril breath)

Fatigue

Headstand - Sirsasana

Shoulderstand – Salamba Sarvangasana

Legs up the wall – Vipariti Karani

Restorative yoga poses

Urinary problems

Aswini Mudra – tones the perineal area, pelvic floor, and increases blood flow to those areas. **The**

New Yoga For People Over 50 – A Comprehensive Guide for Midlife & Older Beginners, Suza Francina

To practice: Sit in a comfortable position, preferable on a height to help keep your posture open, your spine lengthening. Gentle contract the sphincter and vaginal muscles as if trying to hold back urination. The perineum should be held firm and the pelvic floor should feel as if it is being lifted up. Hold the contraction for a few breaths, then release it for a few breaths. Repeat 5-10 times at first, increasing the repetition and duration as you become more comfortable with the practice. Aswini Mudra can be practiced during daily activities while sitting or standing and during many yoga poses.

Sequence for Easing Symptoms of Hot Flashes– Yoga Sequencing(2012)pg. 246-247

Legs up the wall –Viparita Karani

Wind Relieving Pose – Apanasana

Happy Baby Pose – Ananda Balasana

Downward Facing Dog Pose – Adho Mukha Svanasana

Child Pose – Balasana

Standing Forward Fold – Uttanasana

Plow Pose – Halasana

Supported Shoulderstand – Salamba Sarvangasana

Ear Pressing Pose – Karnapidasana

Extended Leg Pose/Flying Fish – Uttana Padasana Prep

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