

pregnancy yoga 3

Entering the last three months of her pregnancy, **Samantha Lee** adapts her yoga practice once again

Pictures: Damien Smyth

PREGNANCY IS A time of tremendous change. The journey into the third trimester – the last stretch, is for many the most challenging and arduous. Your body will have become unrecognisable, and seeing your toes a distant memory. Daily life becomes a strange twilight zone of frequent food snacks, naps and toilet trips, and 'pregnancy brain' is blamed for lost keys, missed appointments and a lack of social savvy.

You may struggle with the idea that the responsibility of another life is in your hands, or have concerns about impending labour and potential complications. Yoga is a true tonic at this time; stabilising the emotions and calming the physical body.

Through fluid and gentle asanas, you can tone and strengthen body in preparation for labour and birth. Common ailments experienced during the later stages of pregnancy, including sleeplessness, heartburn, fluid retention, breathlessness and dizziness, are relieved and reduced. Regular practice through your pregnancy will help create a more aware and enjoyable experience for you and your baby.

If you are suffering SPD (symphysis pubis disorder) then it is advisable to leave out any open legged asanas. A good asana for SPD is cow face pose (gomukhasana), with cushions underneath the buttocks to help give space for the belly. This helps tone the pelvis and hips, and releases the lower back without opening the legs. For anyone with a baby still breech at 35 weeks then leave out squatting, until the baby has turned, as you do not want to engage the buttocks if at all possible.

This session will take approximately an hour depending on how long you stay in each asana. Relish this time of union with your unborn child. Know that this practice will help create a better journey for both of you through labour, birth and the rest of your lives.

Use cushions and props to completely relax and release in each asana. Use your own intuition to help guide you from one movement to another. Come out of anything that is causing you undue discomfort or pain. Do not attempt anything if you are unsure without the instruction of a qualified teacher.



Cat stretch with push up.

Space in the upper chest and body will be getting limited. This is good for opening up the heart and ribs, helping keep the body strong and open. The same movements can be made smaller during labour to help keep the body moving and de-stressed.

Start in child's pose (balasana) with the knees and legs a good distance apart. Stretch your hands out in front of you with palms down.

On an inhale rise up on the knees bending into the arms and coming forward in a mini push up, try to keep the elbows from bending out sideways too far.

By the top of the inhale, you should be up on all fours with your head lifted slightly.

As you exhale, curl your body back down tucking your buttocks back down to your feet.

Really begin to feel the body awakening with each breath

Repeat 10 times.

Rest in child's pose for a few breaths with the knees out wide and feet close, and with a cushion placed under your head and upper body if you need extra support.



Moving arm flow.

Good for creating awareness around the ribs to create inner space for your breath as your baby grows inside of you.

Swap the cross of your legs to relax the pelvis equally on both sides.

Bring your arms out straight in front of you shoulder level. Raise both thumbs and let the other fingers curl. Bring the sides of the thumbs together.

On an inhale gaze at your right thumb and follow it as you open your arm out to the right in a light flowing twist.

As you exhale gradually bring it back to centre.

Repeat on the left hand side.

Do this movement up to 10 times on each side.

Relax the arms back down and then give them a shake and wriggle your shoulders.

Neck and arm exercises

The neck rolls and the moving arm flow below are great for alleviating tight neck and shoulder tension that you may be suffering due to your changing posture.

Neck rolls.

Sit yourself loosely cross-legged on a blanket. You may need a couple of blankets or cushions to place under the bottom to lift you up slightly to realign the pelvis and keep the body open.

On an exhale roll your left ear over to your left shoulder and down and round in a big circular movement. As you bring your head round and up, inhale. Repeat this rotation for 10 movements, then rotate the other way.



Foot exercises.

These will help keep the feet and ankles mobile and stimulate the circulation, easing fluid retention in the ankles and feet, and helping to reduce cramps and the symptoms of varicose veins.

Flex and point.

Bring your legs out in front of you quite wide apart. You can either place a cushion underneath your buttocks if you need to raise the spine to sit easily or sit with your back against the wall for added support.

On an inhale point the toes forward trying to feel the stretch on the front of the foot.

On the exhale flex the toes back up towards you stretching the sole of the foot.

Keep the feet relaxed and lengthened in this flowing movement.

Repeat 10 times.

Give the feet and ankles a shake at the end to release.

Foot rolls.

With the legs out in front of you roll the toes of each foot in to face each other.

On an inhale raise them up and around in big circular motions trying to really get the ankles moving and the legs working. Exhale as the feet roll back and round.

Rotate five times in this direction. Repeat rolling the other way.

Give the feet and legs a shake to release.

Moving wide leg squat.

Excellent for toning the legs and the arms, and useful in the second stage of labour.

From standing open your legs wide apart with your toes slightly pointing outwards.

Bring your palms together at chest level. Raise your arms above your head.

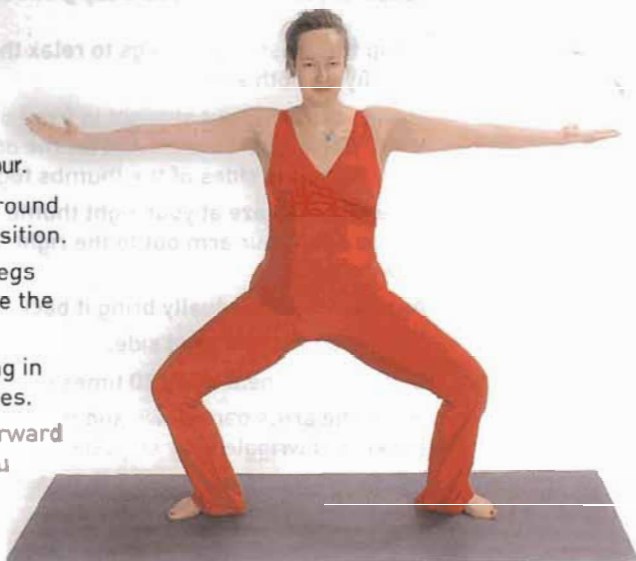
On an exhale open the arms out to the side, palms facing down, and bend into your knees at the same time.

Bring the hands all the way around back to the starting prayer position.

As you inhale straighten the legs and raise the arms back above the head.

Continue inhaling and exhaling in the flowing movement six times.

Try not to let the back lean forward but keep lift in the body as you bend into the knees.





Cat stretch with leg raise

Lower back pain can become a problem if muscles aren't being used properly. This is a gentle flowing way of energising those areas with breath and movement to keep them active and supple.

Begin on all fours, with knees and legs hip distance apart.

Keep your back flat, spread through your fingers and lift out of your shoulders.

On an inhale raise the left leg behind you. The knee can be bent slightly if needed.

Make sure the back does not arch too much in this position but that you are creating strength in your

torso to give you extra stamina and stability. Keep the head in a neutral line with your eyes looking softly towards the floor.

Exhale and release the leg back down to the starting position. Repeat on the other side, and alternate stretching each leg five times.

Come down into child's pose (*Balāsana*) to relax. Rotate the wrists.

An added arm raise of the opposite arm to the raised leg can be incorporated to add extra intensity. In this position keep the arm stretched out on the inhale and the shoulders still relaxed and down.

Sitting meditation

Sit cross-legged, *or lean on cushions*. You can lean against a wall to help relax.

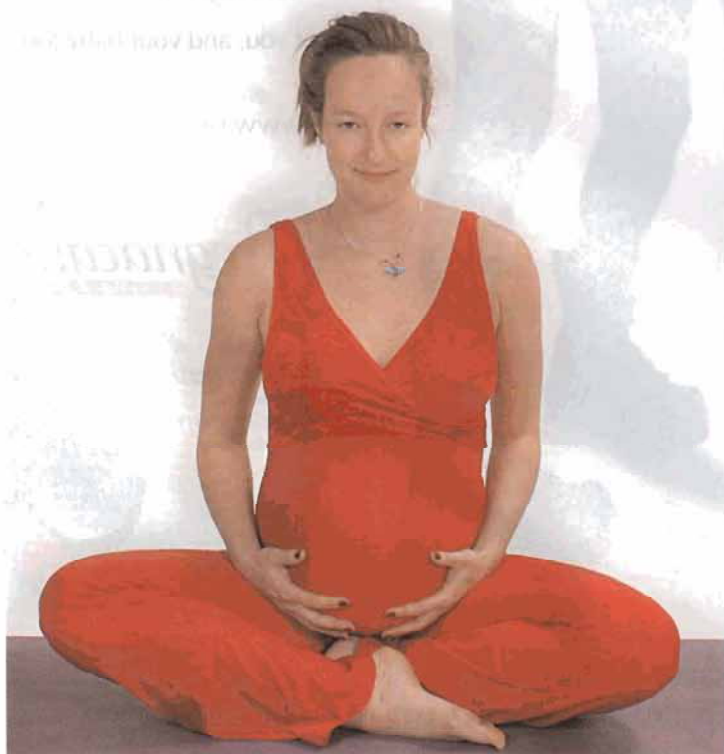
Clasp your hands around your baby, close your eyes. Relax your shoulders, lengthen the spine and become aware of your breath.

Focusing on your baby, inhale and feel the breath rise up all the way through the spine. As you exhale imagine it falling like a waterfall back down to your baby.

Focus more on your exhales trying to make them longer and fuller. Start to exhale through your mouth. Think that you are blowing a feather away from you lightly, letting it drift a little into the air. With each exhale think of that feather lifting into the air like tension being lifted away from your body.

Be aware of the natural pauses at the end and beginning of each breath.

Do this for a minute or two, really sinking into the presence of giving yourself and your baby a drink of vital prana, the life force around us.





Standing forward bend (uttanasana) with props.

This helps to improve blood circulation and energy flow through the legs, and to realign the pelvis. Your spine gets a rest from baby as they can hang down below you. If you feel faint at any time then release from this posture. This position can be practiced with a chair, tabletop or even a partner who can stretch forward too. In this way you can communicate each other to make sure your grounding is secure. A good bonding asana to help bring others into your practice and pregnancy.

Face your chosen prop with your feet wide apart to accommodate the bump when bending. Bring your hands to your waist and on an inhale lift the chest and stretch the front of the spine. On the exhale slowly release your body forward bending from your hip joints. Bring the arms forward in front of you onto your prop, creating a straight line from the arms to the neck and spine and hips. If you are practising with a partner clasp each other's wrists as you bring your arms forward. Feel the stretch of the muscles at the back of the legs and keep the knees lifted and not locked. Think of your baby relaxing into the stretch with you with each deepening breath. To come out bend the knees slightly, release your arms from your prop, bring them back to your hips, and on an inhale curl the body back up to standing with the neck and head being the last things to rise. This position can be practiced a few times, holding for approx eight breaths and then coming slowly back up.

Wide leg side stretch.

Beneficial for increasing mobility in the hips, helping to reduce indigestion and heartburn. Gives you some extra space in your ribs to help both you and your baby breathe easier.

Sit with your legs wide apart. Place a blanket under your buttocks if you need to bring the pelvis forward to help keep length in the spine. Make sure your feet and knees are pointing upwards. Ground your buttock bones into the floor (or cushion).

On an exhale, bring the right hand to the right leg. A tie can be used round the right foot to help. Keep the length of the spine running through your neck to the top of your head in one long line. Place your left hand behind you to help open the shoulders and the ribs.

Breathe fully here, keeping the gaze soft, thinking of your baby stretching to the side with you like a yogic yawn. Stay here for a couple of breaths.

Slowly come up and repeat on the other side.

To release slowly bring the legs back together and give them a shake.



Side lying Relaxation.

Excellent for relieving fatigue and insomnia, which may become commonplace in the last few months of your pregnancy. Also helps reduce high blood pressure. You will need some blankets and cushions.

Come down onto the floor and lean over onto one arm and lower yourself onto your side with your knees bent. Place one or more folded blankets under your head and another between your knees. Place one or more pillows in front of you and rest your arm on them. If you have a sturdy pillow then place this behind you to rest on your back. Pillows can be used in place of blankets, adjusting the height until you feel completely at ease in this position. The idea is to completely relax. Close your eyes, swallow, and then take some slow easy breaths. Soften your eyelids. Let your cheeks feel hollow and loose beneath the cheekbones. Let the fingers curl naturally and your feet flop open. With each exhale feel the large muscles of the legs and buttocks drop away from your bones.



Then travel through your lower and upper body, your arms and wrists and fingers, letting the skin hang loose and soft all over you.

Inhale deeply, filling the lungs, then exhale fully. Now breathe naturally feeling the softness of your body as you sink into your pillow. Stay here for between five to 15 minutes. At the end of relaxation, become aware of your baby resting within you. They will have enjoyed this as much as you. Slowly breathe in deeper and begin to wriggle your fingers and toes. Then awaken the rest of the body gradually bringing yourself back up to sitting.