



YOGA AND THE FOUR TRIMESTERS OF PREGNANCY

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What is a Trimester?

“Trimester” literally means a period of three months. The term is used to describe the three phases of pregnancy, which, being approximately nine months long, divides up neatly into three “trimesters”. It is worth remembering that this is an artificial division, used for convenience. In reality, pregnancy is an ongoing experience, and everyone’s body is different, so don’t expect things always to fit into such a neat pattern. However it is a useful way of getting an overview of what to expect when.

We can also think about a “fourth trimester”, which is the early weeks of life with your new baby. Little babies are designed to



stay very close to their mothers at this time, and your body will still be going through a lot of changes, so it can be useful to think of this period as part of the whole childbirth experience.

First Trimester

Confusingly, the first trimester officially begins before you are actually pregnant. This is because we start counting weeks of pregnancy from the first day of your last period before you fall pregnant. You will be at your most fertile and are likely to conceive around the middle of the month, so you will be counted as being around two weeks pregnant when the sperm and egg meet.



From the moment of conception onwards, your baby starts to develop very quickly. Over the first days and weeks a single cell divides into a ball of cells, and then different layers start to form which will become your baby's skin, digestive system, heart, organs and nervous system. The placenta, cord and membranes which will sustain your baby in your uterus are also developing at this time. At around the time of your first missed



period, the pregnancy is implanting into the thickened lining of your uterus, and you might have a light bleed at this time.

As soon as you become pregnant, your body starts to make hormones to ensure the perfect environment for your baby to grow. Human Chorionic Gonadotrophin (hCG) and Progesterone prevent you from having your period and enrich the uterine lining, allowing the placenta to develop. It is thought that high levels of hCG may contribute to the nausea and vomiting that many women undergo at this time, although this has not been proved.

The first trimester is the period when all your baby's organs and main body systems are developing. Baby's heart starts to beat at around five weeks, her fingernails are starting to form by ten weeks, and by twelve weeks all her body parts are formed. By this point baby can kick, stretch, hiccup and suck. She can feel it if you gently poke your tummy. However you won't be able to feel her moving yet, as she is still only about the size of a lime.

Because so much is happening in this trimester, you may feel quite tired and may experience nausea or vomiting. Your



breasts will enlarge and may feel sore, and you may need to wee more frequently. It's quite common to feel faint or dizzy too. Many people choose not to tell anyone except their partner or close family about the pregnancy, and this can add to the difficulty of feeling sick and exhausted while trying to carry on with normal life and work as though nothing has changed.

Sadly it is true that about one in four pregnancies do end in miscarriage, nearly all in the first trimester, and this is most commonly due to severe chromosomal abnormalities. If you are unlucky enough to experience miscarriage, you may have overwhelming emotions, and it is important to acknowledge your loss and get support. The Miscarriage Association offers online help and information and may be able to direct you to local counselling.

The first trimester can be an emotional rollercoaster. All those hormones will affect your mood, plus you will be beginning to think about the impact of having a baby on your life, your job, your home and your relationships. Around half of all pregnancies are unplanned, so if you hadn't been expecting this right now, you are not alone. Having a first baby is a



massive life change, and you may find you are feeling euphoric one day and quite worried the next. All this is quite normal. Try to find someone close and trusted with whom you can share your feelings.

It's really important to take good care of yourself at this time. Healthy diet and plenty of rest will support your baby's development. You should start taking folic acid to help your baby's nervous system, and this is a good time to give up smoking and alcohol. Let your local midwifery service know you are pregnant, and the midwife will arrange to see you at around 8-10 weeks for your booking appointment. You will be offered a scan at around 12 weeks to check baby's growth, and you will also be offered screening tests for Down Syndrome and other chromosomal abnormalities at this time.

Yoga in the First Trimester

Any yoga practice in the first trimester should be very gentle. Most pregnancy yoga teachers will recommend that you wait until after the twelve week scan before starting classes. If you



already practice yoga regularly, you may wish to continue a gentle and slow paced home practice.

You need plenty of rest and emotional support at this time, so restorative poses (avoiding any deep inversions), and savasana are recommended. You might like to use this special time to deepen your meditation practice, maybe using a meditation app such as Headspace or Calm. A calming pranayama such as alternate nostril breathing may also help you feel grounded and settle your emotions.



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Second Trimester

This is the period from 12 weeks until 28 weeks of pregnancy. It is often described as “the best bit” of pregnancy and the time when many women are said to “glow”. By this stage the pregnancy is well established and the risk of miscarriage is much diminished. Most women start to feel much more energetic and the nausea begins to fade.

You will begin to have a visible bump, and will probably feel able to tell more people about the baby. Many people really enjoy this stage of pregnancy, and everything feels much more real. However, if you are unlucky enough to continue feeling sick, or to feel low or unhappy for any reason, make sure you ask for help and support. You are not alone.

During this period you will start to feel baby move, usually at some time between 16 and 20 weeks. It’s very exciting when you first feel that little flutter, and you will soon notice how baby responds to your voice and movements. You will be offered a scan at around 20 weeks to check that all is well with baby’s



development. Some couples like to find out their baby's sex at this scan, while others prefer to keep it a surprise.

The hormones of pregnancy, especially progesterone and relaxin, will make your ligaments and smooth muscle softer and more stretchy. This has the positive effect of preventing you from going into premature labour and helping to prepare your body for birth. However these hormones can also make you more likely to experience constipation and low blood pressure, and your joints may become looser and more vulnerable to injury. It's important to stay active, but you should avoid high impact exercise and be careful not to over-strain your pelvis or lower back.

During this trimester your baby will increase in weight from 25 grammes to around one kilogramme, growing from the size of a lime to the size of an aubergine. By week 25, baby can respond to light, touch and sound. You can talk and sing to your baby, and you may feel her moving or settling in response. Your bump will grow larger every week, and the midwife will begin to measure the distance from the pelvic bone to the top of your uterus to check that baby is growing well. The extra weight will affect your centre of gravity and posture.



At your midwife visits you will have your blood pressure and urine checked, and you may also be offered a glucose tolerance test to check for signs of gestational diabetes. Ask your midwife to explain more about these tests.

Yoga in the Second Trimester

This is a great time to start pregnancy yoga classes. A specially trained pregnancy yoga teacher will be able to guide you through safe sequences which will assist with your mobility and postural changes and help you feel closer to your body and baby.



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Some good yoga poses for this trimester are energising standing poses such as Warrior poses, Triangle, Goddess pose and Tree balance. Shoulder stretching poses to open the upper body such as Cow face arms and eagle arms will help correct the tightening of the shoulders and thoracic spine which often occurs in pregnancy. Kneeling chest opening twists and “thread the needle” pose will also help correct postural imbalances.

This is a lovely time to rest in restorative poses and focus on baby, often feeling her respond with wriggles and squirms. Pranayama (breathing exercises) such as Hummingbee breath can help you feel very calm and relaxed, and you may find baby enjoys the vibrations too.

Third Trimester

During the final few months of pregnancy, your baby is growing and putting on weight rapidly. Your feelings may swing between from exhaustion and excitement. You may be looking



forward to meeting your baby, but you may also have worries about baby's health or about the birthing process.

During this time you will have more midwife appointments, and you will be making plans for the birth. Many women prefer to give birth in a birthing centre or maybe at home, where you might like to use a birthing pool for pain relief or for birth itself. For others, a hospital labour ward may provide a safe environment for birth if your pregnancy or medical history is more complex.

Wherever your baby is born, it is important that you have thought about your preferences for birthing process. Attending antenatal classes or a hypnobirthing class will give you lots of information to help you decide what is best for you and your family at this time. Remember, though, that many aspects of pregnancy and birth are unpredictable. A supportive birth partner who understands your priorities, and a calm and positive frame of mind can be your best allies.

You may feel very tired at this time, especially if you are continuing to work until close to your due date. Your growing



baby takes up lots of space now, and you may experience breathlessness, indigestion and backache. Some women also have pelvic pain or suffer from high blood pressure at this time. Try to get plenty of rest, stay well hydrated, and eat little and often. Avoiding heavy meals late at night may help you sleep better.

It can be difficult to sleep, due to the combination of heartburn, baby's lively movements and your large bump. If you can manage it, an afternoon nap can be a bit of a life saver during these last few weeks of pregnancy, and it's a good habit to get into for after the birth too. Your yoga practice will be teaching you good techniques for rest and relaxation, which is essential now.

Baby will settle into his final position in your uterus at some time around 36 weeks. After this there is less and less space for him to move freely around. The easiest position for birth is for baby to be head down, with his back on one side of your abdomen. There is some evidence that avoiding sitting for long periods with your hips below your knees may help baby get into a good position, but some babies get themselves into more difficult positions whatever you do.



Hands and knees or gently inverted positions may help some babies to get themselves well positioned. However sometimes it just depends on the shape of your pelvis or uterus or the position of the placenta, so don't blame yourself if baby decides he is happiest bottom down. If your baby stays in a "breech" (bottom down) position, your doctor and midwife will discuss with you how best to manage the birth.

Pregnancy normally lasts around 40 weeks, counting from your last period. It is considered completely normal for your baby to be born at any time between 37 and 42 weeks of pregnancy, so it is more helpful to think about a "due month" than a "due date". Only around 4% of babies are actually born on their due dates (Perinatal Institute data), so try not to get too fixated on that day!

It is completely normal to feel very impatient for baby to be born and tired of being pregnant by now. Try to find relaxing things to do to take your mind off the impending birth. Some women are offered induction of labour for medical reasons, but this can



be a slow and challenging process. If possible and if all is well with you and baby, it is best to wait until baby decides it is time to arrive.





Yoga in the Third Trimester

Your growing bump will mean you will need to adapt some postures to make room for baby, and your practice may naturally become slower and gentler at this time.

Gentle seated twists and upper body opening stretches will help ease some of the aches and pains of later pregnancy. Adapted sun salutations and cat/cow or swooping cat movements will help maintain your mobility while not putting too much strain on your hips or lower back.

Restorative positions such as supported child's pose or supported reclined cobbler's pose will help you rest and relax. Pelvic floor exercises will help you prepare for a good recovery after the birth.

You should avoid lying flat on your back during the third trimester, as pressure on your large veins returning blood to your heart may make you feel faint. Savasana and resting poses are best lying on your left side, supported by plenty of



cushions, blocks and bolsters. This is a good time for meditation practice, preparing your mind and emotions for the huge experience of birth which awaits.

Golden thread breath is a beautiful pranayama (breathing practice) for this trimester. This gentle breath will be useful to you during labour, and for relaxation after the birth.

Fourth Trimester

The so called “fourth trimester” is the special time following birth when you and your family are adapting to life with a new baby. Many cultures mark this period with special practices and ceremonies, and some people believe a new mother should stay at home or eat certain foods at this time.

It is certainly a time of huge change. Your body is recovering from birth, your breasts may be changing to nourish your baby, and your mind and emotions will have a great deal to cope with. If the birth was not as you had expected, this may impact on



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how you feel. You will be getting up to feed and care for baby all round the clock, and your partner and any other children will be adjusting to the new family member too. Unsurprisingly, many women can feel quite overwhelmed.





It's really important to be kind to yourself at this time. After being the centre of attention during the pregnancy, mothers can easily feel relegated to the role of a mere carer for the baby.

Make sure you get lots of rest, and accept all useful offers of practical help with things like meals and cleaning. Restrict visitors as much as you can to begin with. Everyone wants to come and coo over baby, but make sure you are not having to do extra work to look after all those visitors too.

Yoga in the Fourth Trimester

Don't rush to get back to your normal exercise regime too quickly after the birth. You should begin pelvic floor exercises as soon as possible after birth to help with healing, and rest and meditation is always good.

Postnatal yoga classes are suitable from around 6 to 12 weeks following birth, depending on whether you had a straightforward birth or whether you needed a ventouse, forceps or caesarean delivery. Listen to your body and don't rush anything.



Once you are feeling sufficiently recovered, pelvic tilts, gentle leg raises, seated twists and shoulder openers and slow, energising flowing sequences can all help you regain strength and muscle tone.

Mother and baby yoga classes can be a wonderful way to recover your fitness and have fun with baby at the same time. Baby Massage is a great way to bond more closely with your baby and enjoy special times together.

Pregnancy and Postnatal Yoga in Billericay, Essex

Karen Lawrence is a fully trained and accredited specialist teacher of Pregnancy and Postnatal Yoga, Meditation and Baby Massage. She teaches small group classes from her beautiful home studio in Billericay, Essex.



Karen also offers postnatal massage and healing therapies to help you recover from your birth and feel great.

Karen is mum to seven children. She previously practised as a Midwife and Health Visitor in Essex and London.

You can find out more about Karen's yoga classes at <https://www.thecalm.space.co.uk>

You can call Karen on 07981 286767 or email her on karen@thecalm.space.co.uk

Helpful sources of information

Life in the womb - amazing video of how your baby develops:

<http://www.lifeinthewombapp.com/>

Best Beginnings and Baby Buddy App – a great and fun source of support and advice through your pregnancy and beyond:

<https://www.bestbeginnings.org.uk/baby-buddy>



NHS Choices – lots of evidence-based information about pregnancy and health:

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/pregnancy-and-baby/>

Tommy's – information for a safe and healthy pregnancy

<https://www.tommys.org/pregnancy>

Miscarriage Association – support for anyone who loses a baby:

<https://www.miscarriageassociation.org.uk/>

Meditation apps – helping you slow down and find inner space:

<https://www.headspace.com/headspace-meditation-app>

<https://www.calm.com/>