

Fertile Ground

Calming techniques taught in fertility yoga classes support women on the path to pregnancy.

AFTER MORE THAN A YEAR of trying to get pregnant, Michelle Cutler was beginning to feel deeply disappointed, anxious, and frustrated with her body. Cutler was just 32 but had long suffered from polycystic ovary syndrome, a hormonal imbalance that's one of the most common causes of female infertility.

Cutler tried fertility drugs and two rounds of intrauterine insemination without success. It seemed as though every woman she knew was moving on to motherhood while she stood still. "I felt so stuck," she says, "like my life was on hold."

Through the Fertility Centers of Illinois, a consortium of clinics where she received treatment, Cutler learned about Pulling Down the Moon, a holistic fertility center in Chicago that offers yoga, acupuncture, massage, and other treatments. Cutler began taking

fertility yoga—gentle classes that emphasize breath, relaxation, and opening the muscles around the hips and pelvis.

Similar programs are cropping up at yoga studios and fertility centers across the country, driven by patient demand and doctors' growing interest in alternative therapies. Some fertility yoga classes are designed for women with diagnosed problems, but others welcome those who are just beginning to prepare themselves for pregnancy. While there's been little research on whether fertility yoga aids conception, other research about yoga and stress suggests it may.

And yogic philosophy can help women stop trying to control the process. "As they say, 'You can't force the river,'" says Brenda Strong, a yoga instructor who teaches fertility yoga at UCLA's Mind/Body Institute. "The idea is to invite the river to flow through you." Some women report that after they stopped struggling to get

techniques and acupuncture. In a control group, just 20 percent had babies.

"Yoga is really good for patients who are highly anxious, and fertility patients tend to be anxious," Domar says. "A lot of these patients are angry with their bodies for not doing what they want. Yoga gets them back in touch with their bodies." Domar warns, though, that vigorous exercise may impede fertility, and she suggests women avoid physically demanding forms such as Ashtanga and Power Yoga if they are having trouble conceiving.

EAST MEETS WEST

Of course, yoga is not a silver bullet, particularly for problems such as blocked fallopian tubes. "We can help with the hormone regulation, stress levels, and blood-flow issues," says yoga teacher and Pulling Down the Moon cofounder Tami Quinn, but she urges women to consult doctors. "The East-meets-West approach is the fastest way to meet your goal."

Any woman who wants to enhance her reproductive health—whether or not she

has diagnosed infertility—can benefit from yoga, says Eden Fromberg, an obstetrician/gynecologist with Soho OB-GYN and founder of Lila Yoga, Dharma & Wellness in New York City. "Stress is harmful to just about everything physiologically," she says. "When the body feels like it doesn't have enough energy, it will start to shut down the less crucial functions. One of those is reproduction."

During her fertility yoga workshops, Fromberg introduces students to Fertility Awareness, a practical method of charting physical signals (such as body temperature and cervical fluid) each day to find out when a woman is able to conceive. Studies have shown that couples trying to get pregnant have much better odds if they know when the woman is fertile, and some women find a sense of empowerment when they tune in closely to their own fertility cycle.

When Leslie Pearlman and her husband began trying to have a baby four years ago, she did her best to push the what-ifs out of her mind. Pearlman, a Forrest Yoga

instructor from Hampton Bays, New York, was 35 at the time. What if she had difficulty getting pregnant? Worse, what if she couldn't conceive at all? She found comfort in being able to read her body's fertility signals. "I had this wisdom I was tapping into," she says. After three months, she became pregnant with her daughter, Maya, now a toddler.

LETTING GO

While the medical profession views yoga as helpful for fertility primarily because it reduces stress, yogis see much broader benefits. It balances hormones, opens the hip and pelvic areas, and improves the flow of energy through the body.

In nearly 30 years of teaching, John Friend has helped many women with fertility issues. The founder of Anusara Yoga, Friend says he's noticed a pattern: Often, the apana vayu, the body's downward-flowing energy system that's involved in reproduction, is pulled upward, usually because women are unsettled in some way. "You literally get ungrounded," says

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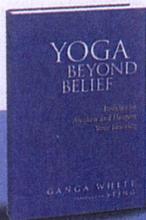
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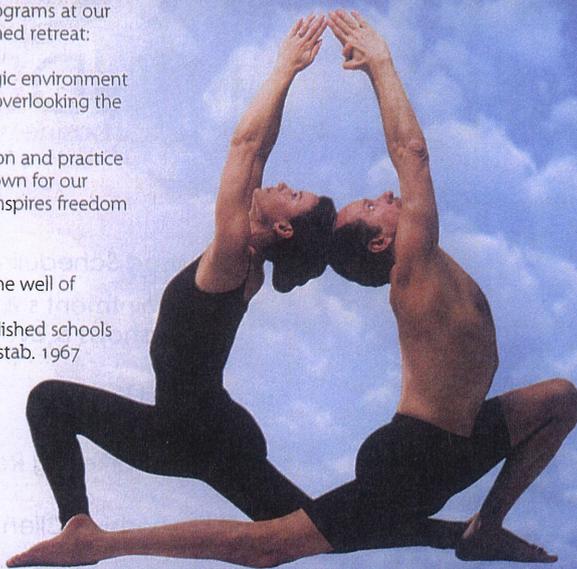
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pregnant, they conceived. Others imagined parenthood in a new way—by deciding to adopt, becoming a godparent, or focusing on a creative project.

When Cutler first tried fertility yoga, she was emotionally depleted from the failed insemination attempts and was preparing to try in vitro fertilization (IVF). Yoga, she says, helped her stay grounded. “I felt so nurtured and so cared for,” she says. “I experienced a sense of calm, and I hadn’t felt that in so long.”

She also noticed physical changes. “I started to actually feel like I was opening my hips and making my body ready to receive embryos,” Cutler says. And within just a few months, she became pregnant through IVF and now has twin daughters, Ella and Brady. Cutler can’t prove it, but she is convinced that yoga helped her have a successful pregnancy.

When Strong began researching infertility in 1996, little information about fertility yoga was available. Strong, an actress who plays Mary Alice on ABC’s *Desperate Housewives*, wanted a second child but

was struggling to get pregnant. She wasn’t able to find what she wanted elsewhere, so she developed her own fertility yoga program, which she began teaching at UCLA in 2000.

Since then, interest has grown. “Especially in the last year, it seems to have hit a critical mass,” Strong says. One reason is that science still can’t explain many aspects of infertility, which affects 12 percent of women of childbearing age in the U.S. Approximately 20 percent of cases are considered “idiopathic,” meaning doctors can’t identify the cause.

SUBDUING STRESS

Stress, however, is known to raise the likelihood of infertility, and yoga is very effective at reducing stress. Women who have trouble conceiving experience anxiety and depression rates similar to those of patients with cancer, HIV/AIDS, and other serious illnesses, according to a study from Harvard Medical School. And even women without fertility problems can find trying to have a baby—a mysterious

process ultimately beyond our control—an anxiety-inducing experience.

The links between stress and infertility are complex and not fully understood, but cortisol, the so-called stress hormone, can interfere with ovulation, says Eve Feinberg, a reproductive endocrinologist with the Fertility Centers of Illinois. Lower stress levels and having a positive mood and outlook can increase the odds that fertility treatments will work.

Perhaps the strongest evidence that reducing stress (through yoga and other means) can boost fertility comes from a study by Alice Domar, PhD, of Harvard Medical School. She created a fertility program at the Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine at Massachusetts General Hospital and later opened the Domar Center for Mind/Body Health.

In 2000 Domar found that 55 percent of infertility patients became pregnant (and had a baby) within one year of participating in her 10-session program, in which they were introduced to yoga and meditation, along with other relaxation

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conceptual help

Check out these resources for learning more about using yoga and natural therapies for reproductive problems.

For help with a home-based practice, check out the video **Yoga 4 Fertility**, with Brenda Strong, a fertility yoga instructor at UCLA. Or try the CD **Fertility Yoga**, with Jolyon Cowan, a yoga instructor at the Domar Center and the Benson-Henry Institute in Boston.

Fully Fertile, a new book by Pulling Down the Moon staff members Tami Quinn, Beth Heller, and Jeanie Lee Bussell, includes illustrated yoga poses and explores the physical, psychological, and spiritual elements of holistic fertility.

Friend. To the trained eye, he says, it's easy to recognize the biomechanical signs — thigh bones that are pulled up and forward in the hip socket and a tailbone that doesn't properly scoop downward.

Friend recommends basic hip openers, such as a lunge with one knee on the floor. Another simple position is to come to all fours, then rest one cheek on the floor, feeling the pelvic floor dilate on the inhale and contract on the exhale. "You have to bring the mind to the area," he says.

Friend believes that women with fertility problems would benefit from any nurturing yoga class — not just those billed as fertility yoga — as long as they learn proper alignment. Beginners should stick to simple poses, he says.

Viparita Karani (Legs-up-the-Wall Pose) is often taught to women preparing to conceive because it is calming and brings energy to the pelvis. Many instructors also highly recommend Supta Baddha Konasana (Reclining Bound Angle Pose), a restorative hip opener, as well as Paschimottanasana (Seated Forward Bend) and Uttanasana (Standing Forward Bend), both of which are relaxing.

Deep twists and positions like Dhanurasana (Bow Pose), which puts pres-

Dr. Alice Domar's book **Conquering Infertility** explains her mind-body program that includes yoga and meditation.

Katie Singer's **The Garden of Fertility** is a guide to fertility awareness and other aspects of gynecological health. Singer's **Honoring Our Cycles** is a workbook containing charts and information about the menstrual cycle.

Luna Yoga, by Adelheid Ohlig, explores how yoga can enhance fertility and other aspects of reproductive health.

The American Fertility Association's hotline (888/917-3777) can help you find fertility yoga classes and other complementary therapies, as well as traditional medical services.

sure on the abdomen, can provide good preparation for reproduction. But women should avoid those poses when they might be pregnant, as the positions could interfere with implantation or harm the fetus, Fromberg says. Positive visualizations, heart openers, and poses that foster self-nurturing can help women cope with stress and disappointment.

Debbi Cooper, a self-described "control freak" who had multiple miscarriages, recalls a yoga class in which she grew frustrated trying to do a handstand. "I remember thinking, 'It's just like infertility,'" she says. "Sometimes you try as hard as you can to make something happen, but it still doesn't work when you want it to." When she got home, Cooper told her husband to watch as she demonstrated what she was doing wrong. "All of a sudden I got up there effortlessly," she says.

The lesson: "Sometimes you really do need to let go," Cooper says. In 2007 she gave birth to her son, Gabe. "I don't know if yoga helped me get pregnant," she says, "but it helped me find peace in a very stressful time." ■

Denise Kersten Wills is a writer based in Washington, DC.



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