

Bend it



We kid you not - yoga for mums and their babies is all the rage. We show you how...

You may be baffled by the idea of baby yoga, imagining newborns putting their legs behind their heads and struggling into the lotus position. But yoga for babies is an opportunity for you and your little one to enjoy an activity together, and to discover how his body moves and stretches as well as ways to support and comfort him.

What will yoga do for my baby?

It's important to cradle your baby, with his back and neck supported and his legs bent, just as he was before birth. But it's also essential that he's given the chance to stretch and expand the movements he did in the womb, and discover how it feels to straighten his spine. This is where yoga comes in. It gently encourages your newborn's spine to unfold from its curled foetal position, helping him to gain neck control and his muscles to grow stronger. By stretching his limbs, he'll also open up his hip, shoulder, knee and elbow joints.

Getting started

Babies don't need to be undressed for yoga, although they'll enjoy

being unrestrained by clothes some of the time, when it's warm enough. Always keep your baby's feet bare, though, not only as it gives you a better hold, but also because of the benefits of handling and massaging his feet.

- **The time** There's no rule about what time of day to do yoga with your baby, although the evening may be best for the main routine, especially if your baby is unsettled. Combined with massage and a bath, it will help pleasantly tire out your little one and promote deeper sleep.
- **The place** You can do yoga with your baby anywhere. If you have room, make a yoga corner in your house, where you can have a mat and a few cushions or a beanbag on the floor or on a low bed. Ideally, this should be next to a space of bare wall for you to stretch against.

Your baby's changing mat or table are also suitable for yoga if they're a comfortable height. Placing your baby on a special blanket, mat or sheet that you can carry with you to use anywhere, can also give your baby a greater sense of continuity and recognition, which adds to the familiarity of the yoga routines.

1 Just relax, baby!

'Relaxed holding' is central to yoga with babies; it's important to use this while your baby is still light and easy to carry, before you've got into the habit of holding him another way. When your baby is 'held relaxed', he can literally relax and enjoy life. This, in turn, allows you to let go of any tensions. Here are four holds to try:

Basic 'relaxed holding' face-down position

Holding babies face-down is a fairly new concept in the West, but most babies prefer this position and are instantly pacified by it. One main advantage is that it puts comforting pressure on the abdomen, making it therapeutic, especially for babies with colic.

If you hold your baby too high, your shoulders will be tense. To find the right position, practise while seated.

This 'relaxed holding' position is a 'safety pose' in which you use both hands and various support points to give your baby maximum freedom and stability. You can adjust this position so your baby is more or less upright in a 'relaxed seat hold' close to your body, resting on your 'seat hand', or

lying across your body with his back to your rib cage so he faces outwards.

Face-down safety position

With your baby in the basic seat hold, hold him firmly against your rib cage. Slide your baby's chest on to your upper hand and hold his upper arm firmly between thumb and forefinger. Now place your strong hand - the 'seat hand' - between your baby's legs to support his abdomen. Move him face-down, keeping his head aligned with his spine. For additional support, rest his head on your forearm.

Rolling variation

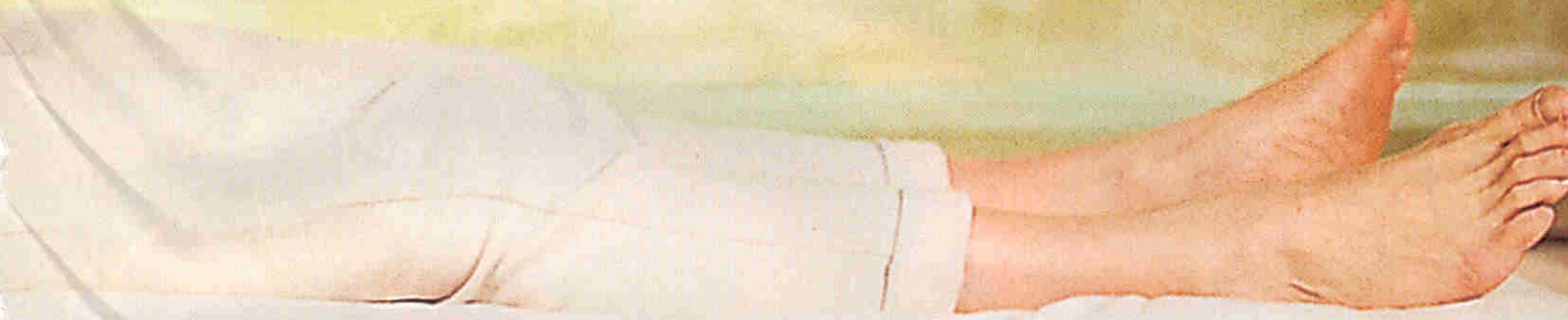
Holding your baby in this position, roll him up and inward to face you (and perhaps give him a cuddle or a kiss), then out again. Try this sitting down before doing it standing up.

Extension of position

Once you're confident, hold him more loosely without securing his arm between thumb and forefinger (as shown, above). As his neck strengthens, practise supporting only his chest while he hangs over your arm, with your strong hand ready to give additional seat support if needed. Experiment with different ways of holding using these guidelines. **CAUTION** For added safety, sit on a soft carpet or a bed while experimenting.



Like baby



2 It's hip and happening

The first hip sequence corresponds to the core of Hatha yoga, which aims to open the hip and knee joints. This will tone the deeper muscles of the body around the base of the spine.

Knees to chest

This stimulates the digestive system.

- Hold your baby's legs just under the knees and bend them open, slightly wider than the hips. Press your baby's knees firmly on the sides of his abdomen, just under his rib cage.
- Release pressure and repeat two or three times, taking your time, relaxing in between without lifting your hands.
- If your baby seems uncomfortable and



his abdomen seems hard, massage it gently and try the movement again later.

Knees from side to side

This posture slightly twists the base of your baby's spine.

- With your hands in the same position as before, bring the bent knees of your baby together in alignment (as shown left), and move them to the left and to the right.
- Press firmly on each side of the abdomen, taking your time to release the pressure before changing sides.

Pedal stretch

Vary the previous posture by moving the legs alternately towards the rib cage and stretched towards you, in a slow pedalling action.

Half lotus

- Holding your baby's feet, bring the left foot towards the right hip in a half lotus position. Press the heel on the side wherever it reaches easily.
- Release and do the same with right foot.

Butterfly

This posture opens your baby's hips. Hold your baby's ankles with both hands and bring the soles of his feet together. Gently push them towards his abdomen.

3 Balancing act

Balances have positive effects on the nervous system, and are done with new babies in a very gentle, supportive way. Start sitting, then do them standing.

Cradling seat hold

This pose helps strengthen your baby's spine, and co-ordinates back muscles.

Use your stronger hand under your baby's bottom to make a seat. Stand, kneel or sit (with your baby on your lap sideways), with your strong hand in front of him. Support his head with your other hand, ensuring that you also support the base of his neck. This is the upright seat hold for balances.

- When comfy, place your open strong hand under the baby's bottom and lift gently. He's now balancing on your hand, supported by your other hand behind his head. Practise getting your baby as upright as possible, then lessen your support of his head, but keep your hand in position.
- Hold the position for a moment before holding him close again. Continue with the following:

Mini-drop

Some babies enjoy this straightaway, but others may be startled by the drop and extend their arms at first in a reflex called the Moro reflex. The more 'settled' a new baby is,

the less he'll be startled. The mini-drop is not only an indicator but will also help a baby to become more secure. It can be soothing, too. Do it with your baby in the seat hold (shown, below), as before, or with your baby facing away from you and your weaker hand as a safe support across his chest.

Lift him gently with your seat hand, then let your arm drop a little, while continuing to hold him in the same way. Repeat once or twice if your baby enjoys it. Move slowly and avoid shaking and jostling him.

CAUTION Allow full support of your baby's neck and head with your arm across his chest.

Mini-swing

All babies enjoy rocking, and benefit from it. This is another extension of

the seat hold. In the same position, swing him gently from side to side, gradually increasing it to his liking.

CAUTION Until you feel confident handling him freely, practise these postures with your baby dressed rather than naked.



Support points for relaxed holding positions

- Your breastbone and top ribs
- Your arm across the baby's chest
- The baby's spine supported against you, and his head supported in alignment
- Your hand under the baby's seat

Want to know more?

Baby Yoga: Gentle Exercises For Babies, Mums And Dads, by Françoise Barbira Freedman (Gaia, £10.99), is available from amazon.co.uk.