

Why are some poses not practised during menstruation?

by Pixie Lillas

This is often a bit of a puzzle for new students as women have become accustomed in our culture to ignoring menstruation and often do not want to feel restricted by it. This is understandable and nowadays not many situations allow for taking a bit more rest during this time of the month. Yoga however aims at something different: an increased self awareness and the best possible health for our body.

During menstruation pupils are asked to abstain from certain postures and to focus on poses which are both appropriate and helpful during the few days of the cycle. Over time, students will learn to create a sequence which is of maximum benefit for menstruation. Even in a general menstrual programme, however, there will be room for diversification according to each woman's needs. The aim is to create the best possible environment for nature to follow its course and to bring into balance any disturbances, mental or physical, which may occur during the days before or during menstruation.

The poses which are considered to be contraindicated are: the inverted postures, backbends and strong abdominal twists and contractions.

Inverted postures are avoided during the whole cycle of menstrual flow. If practised they may interfere with the rhythm of the cycle, cause interruption of the flow, and can cause unhealthy matter to remain in the uterus which may, in turn, form cysts or create other problems.

Backbends stimulate the adrenal glands and, at a time when there is already extra activity and heat inside the body, can overstimulate our system. This can lead to the flow increasing and/ or stopping and then restarting with heavier discharge.

Closed twists and strong abdominal contractions are also inappropriate during menstruation. The extra internal pressure on the organs and the potential irritation to the sensitive cervical area are to be avoided.

All of the poses mentioned above are contraindicated and therefore should not be practised during the entire duration of menstruation.

Beyond avoiding certain postures, in yoga there are other points to consider.

It is best not to overexert ourselves at a time when certain areas of the body are already working hard. On the inside it can be somewhat like doing exercise with a fever, where the body is already tired and trying to cope with the job at hand. It is recommended that women not overextend themselves in yoga during those days but rather give their system a rest and attend to any symptoms present. Most of the time we ignore signals such as heaviness, tiredness, low blood pressure, irritability, or abnormal flow, amongst others. To work towards feeling more balanced and to avoid overtaxing ourselves, fast, jumping postures, strong standing poses, or long holdings in challenging postures are also to be avoided, especially in the first few days of heavier flow.

What is suggested is a sequence of restorative, calming and cooling postures like sitting forward bends done restfully with the head supported and quiet energy-boosting asanas like *supta virasasana* and *supta baddha konasana*, *setubandha* over a bolster. These latter poses are the ones where we lie back over a support to open the chest and extend and/or spread the abdominal region. They serve to alleviate cramping and heaviness in the abdomen and to bring positivity and mental alertness.

In summary, there are specific poses which will facilitate mental and physical equilibrium whilst allowing the body to do its job of releasing the waste material to be discharged. It is not necessary to be feeling bad or to have menstrual problems to follow an appropriate sequence. From personal experience, and from what most other students have felt themselves, once we learn to adapt and to slow down enough to see what would be most beneficial at the time, we begin to welcome the chance to get to know our needs more precisely. The aim is to feel more refreshed, relaxed and lighter during a time which is sometimes characterised by completely different sensations.

It is helpful to you and to your teacher if you can let them know at the beginning of the class if you are menstruating and if you are experiencing any particular problems at the time.

Pixie Lillas started yoga in 1976 with Dona Holleman in Italy and first went to the Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute in Pune, India in 1977. She co-founded the Balmain Iyengar Yoga Studio in 1980 and has been director and principal teacher there ever since. As well as teaching at the BIYS, Pixie runs teacher training courses and workshops in Australia and in Europe. She has been closely involved with the BKS Iyengar Yoga Association since it started in 1985 and with the running of assessments for teacher certification since that time.