Yoga in pregnancy: a glance at the evidence

Virginia Campbell, NCT Yoga for Pregnancy (YfP) co-ordinator, looks at what the research evidence tells us about the benefits of practising yoga during pregnancy.

I’ve observed over years of teaching that yoga has multiple benefits for pregnant women: they become more aware of their body and their posture; they experience increased confidence in their ability to give birth; they become more relaxed; and they tend to have easier labours. But is my experience backed up by formal research evidence?

Research evidence on using yoga in pregnancy

So far, there have only been a handful of studies looking specifically at the impact of yoga in pregnancy.

A recent small randomised controlled trial (RCT) in Thailand has examined the effects of a yoga programme in healthy first-time mothers during pregnancy, on aspects of the women’s experiences related to the kind of outcomes that I have observed.1 The study was designed to look at the impact of practising a yoga programme that included educational activities and yoga during pregnancy on the mother’s comfort, labour pain and birth outcomes. The trial involved 74 women on their first pregnancy with outcomes being assessed on 66 women. The women in the yoga group were invited to undertake six, one-hour sessions of yoga and were encouraged to practise at home too. Women in the control group had routine care at hospital visits lasting about 20-30 minutes. Both groups received weekly telephone calls. The women doing yoga were found to have higher levels of comfort during labour and at two hours after labour, and reported less labour pain than the women in the control group. The women doing yoga were also reported to have shorter labours (p < 0.05).

Another RCT aimed at reducing stress during pregnancy in healthy women, carried out in India, compared yoga plus deep relaxation with standard prenatal exercises.2 Although 122 women were randomised, only 90 were analysed and these losses (for various reasons) may have affected the comparison of the outcomes in this study. So we cannot be sure of their findings about less stress for the women doing the yoga.

There have also been two non-randomised studies conducted in India and here the researchers focused mainly on whether yoga can reduce medical complications or increase baby’s birth weight.3,4 The first involved 335 women attending an antenatal clinic in Bangalore.3 Women chose whether to attend yoga classes or walk for 30 minutes twice a day, and they were then matched on a number of criteria. The risk of differences in outcomes being due to baseline differences between the two groups is considerable, and so these findings cannot be relied on to address the effectiveness of yoga in pregnancy. This is also likely to be true of their other study,4 because of the research design. However, I have not yet been able to see the full paper to make an assessment.

Evidence on relaxation in pregnancy and labour

Several small studies have looked at the benefits of using relaxation techniques — a major component of YfP classes.5,6,7 These studies show potential and so I am planning to continue this work to look more thoroughly at the studies on yoga and relaxation.

Conclusion

The studies looking at the impact of practising yoga or other kinds of relaxation for pregnant women have shown encouraging results, suggesting that they may possibly benefit both the mother and the baby. It would be helpful to undertake a systematic review of both yoga and relaxation in pregnancy. These are techniques with potential to help women and it would be good to know about all the studies that have addressed these questions. I was unable to find any studies that measured women’s confidence in their ability to give birth or their attitudes towards pain in labour. I am interested in pursuing this as well as the impact of other factors which I feel impact on the improved birth outcomes reported by NCT yoga for pregnancy and Relax, Stretch and Breathe classes. These include women-only groups, the power of positive birth stories and the possible positive effect of women attending YfP sessions over an extended period of time during pregnancy, which is often the case.

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References