

# *a woman's* lifeline

HOW TO CREATE A NURTURING PRACTICE FOR EVERY STAGE OF YOUR LIFE

Yoga has been a lifelong companion for Catherine de los Santos (shown at left in Eka Pada Rajakapotasana, or One-Legged King Pigeon Pose). She's loved movement since she was a child, and she started attending formal yoga classes at the University of Idaho at age 17. After learning more about the spiritual aspects of yoga in B.K.S. Iyengar's *Light on Yoga*, she committed herself to a daily practice. At the time she had no idea that yoga would help her weather so many physical and emotional challenges. In her energetic 20s, when de los Santos started teaching yoga, asana practice helped her to calm herself. During her 30s, it boosted her confidence. When hot flashes hit in her 40s, various yogic practices helped her manage them. Now 55, de los Santos says that yoga has helped her get through menopause and the emotional upheavals that came when her parents died.

"I think the key is to not stop practicing. That's what I tell my students," says de los Santos, who owns and teaches at Darshana Yoga studio in Palo Alto, California. "Weaving your poses around your life is a good idea." In the pages that follow, four women in the midst of life's very different stages—adolescence, the childbearing years, perimenopause, and postmenopause—give examples of how to do just that.

"Yoga has important elements for all phases of a woman's life," says Louann Brizendine, a neuro-psychiatrist at the University of California at San Francisco and the founder of its Women's and Teens' Mood and Hormone Clinic. "During times of radical hormonal changes, women feel least inclined to practice yoga, but that's when we need it the most." Those changes in body chemistry can wreak havoc on your mood. But according to Brizendine, who wrote *The Female Brain*, there is good evidence that during a practice like yoga, your body releases chemicals into the bloodstream that bring you a sense of well-being and contentment.

A consistent yoga practice supports women physically, emotionally, and spiritually—but adapting your practice to meet your needs at each juncture is vital. While you can enjoy a challenging yoga regimen at any age, you'll get the most from a practice tailored to the present—in other words, customized for your stage in life and how you're feeling on any given day. Taking time to be aware of what's happening in your life, in your body, and with your emotions is the key to getting the most from what yoga can offer you, all through your life.

[ perimenopause ]

# riding the roller coaster

## WHAT'S HAPPENING INSIDE

Technically, menopause lasts only 24 hours—it's the day 12 months after your final period, Brizendine says. But the transition leading up to that significant day can last 10 years. The perimenopausal passage usually happens sometime between the ages of 42 and 55, when you go from normal menses to none at all. During this stage, you experience an erratic cycling of estrogen, progesterone, and testosterone that can lead to insomnia, hot flashes, fatigue, PMS, depression, irritability, anxiety, and low libido. "You'd gotten used to your menstrual cycle, and all of a sudden your hormone chemistry changes dramatically," Brizendine explains.

## ADAPTING YOUR PRACTICE

Studies show that conscious breathing is a great option for managing perimenopausal symptoms. Simple pranayama with a 5-second inhalation and 5-second exhalation for 15 minutes twice a day can cut hot flashes by 44 percent, according to a study in *Menopause*, the journal of the North American Menopause Society. And this is a time to pay close attention to your physical and emotional states and see how your practice affects them. Inversions can relieve stress and insomnia, bends can relieve fatigue and depression, forward bends help ease irritability and anxiety. Many women find that their practice, once aggressive and fast-paced, melts into one of longer, held, sustained poses.

**BENEFITS** Help relieve stress, ease depression, and manage hot flashes and other symptoms.

Sarvangasana  
*Shoulderstand*

## REAL EXPERIENCE

"Perimenopause can take you into physical and emotional upheaval," says physician and yoga teacher Sara Gottfried, our model here. Her perimenopause started after the birth of her son, and then, at age 38, "I have mood swings, and my night sweats worsen with my Ash-farga practice, so I do a more Anu-Farnsi-metta-Anglo-Farmer style of yoga." Her center of gravity has changed, and she enjoys arm balances and inversions more now. "My practice is informed by my hormones and emotional content: In my 20s and most of my 30s, I was flexible and on-task. Now I focus on survival and regulating my mood, so that I don't rage at my family. I prevent rage with forward bends and inversions, I prevent depression with backbends and pranayama."

Hold at least two blankets into rectangles and stack them. Put a sticky mat over them to avoid slipping. Lie on the blankets with your legs stretched, your shoulders supported and your head on the floor. Bring your arms alongside your body, palms facing down. On an exhalation, bring the knees to the chest and take a few deep breaths. Then press into the floor with your hands and raise the legs off the floor, bringing the arms to your back with the fingertips facing up with your hands supporting your back. Slowly raise your torso so that it comes perpendicular to the floor. Draw your elbows toward each other as you walk your hands on your back toward the floor. As you inhale, lift your bent knees toward the ceiling, bringing your thighs in line with your torso. Lift through the balls of your feet, soften the throat and eyes, and let the shoulder blades move toward your sacrum. Press the backs of your upper arms and the tops of your shoulders actively into the floor, and focus on lifting the spine away from it. Gaze softly at your chest. Stay for 1 minute. To come out, bend your knees to your chest, raise your head on the floor, and roll slowly onto your back.



## Parivrtta Janu Sirsasana

*Revolved Head-to-Knee Pose*

**BENEFITS** Helps with emotional calming during time of intense hormonal shifts.

Start by sitting on the floor with your legs outstretched in Dandasana (Staff Pose). Bend the left leg and bring the sole of the left foot to the inner right thigh. Twist the trunk to the left as you stretch the right arm toward the extended right leg, reaching toward the inner side of the right foot. Bring the left arm overhead and reach toward the right foot, coming into a side stretch. Bring your bottom elbow toward the floor and your top biceps alongside your ear. On the exhalation, gently twist your torso toward the ceiling, bringing your head between your arms. On each exhalation, rotate your torso a bit more toward the ceiling. Stay here for 30 seconds or so. To come out, release your hands and come back to Staff Pose. Then repeat on the other side.



## Marichyasana

*Marichi's Twist*

Sit on the floor with your legs outstretched. Bend your left knee and place the sole of the foot flat on the floor with the left heel as close to the left sitting bone as possible. As you twist your torso to the right, bring the left shoulder forward until the left armpit touches the left shin. Leave the arm where it is and unwind the twist and face forward. On an exhalation,

**BENEFITS** Can help manage perimenopausal symptoms like mild depression, hot flashes, and anxiety.

turn the left arm around the left shin and thigh, bend the left elbow, and bring the left forearm behind the back at waist level.

On an exhalation, swing the right hand behind your back and clasp both hands together. As you exhale, extend your torso forward and lower it toward the extended leg. Relax the shoulders. Stay for 1 minute.

To come out, release the arms and extend the left leg. Repeat on the other side.

