CHAPTER 6

STANDING POSTURES AND EXERCISES

The standing yoga postures in this chapter are ideal to practise throughout your pregnancy and are mostly easy to do. They give a lovely stretch while toning your whole body, and many of them increase stamina and flexibility. Some are quite strenuous and more demanding on the body, so care needs to be taken not to overdo them—they are not recommended if you are fatigued or low in energy. The exercises and postures in this chapter can be done on their own, or in combination with those from other chapters.

For all postures that commence from a standing position, always be aware that your shoulders are relaxed and that you are not standing with an exaggerated arch in your lower back. This is important because as your pregnancy progresses you might be more inclined to have extra curve in your back which leads to discomfort and backache. To overcome this and ensure correct posture tilt your hips and pelvis slightly forward.

Hand and Finger Exercises

These exercises help maintain flexibility in your wrists, hands and fingers, and improve circulation in your lower arms. They are especially useful if your hands are inclined to swell in hot weather, if you spend a lot of time on the computer, and especially if you develop carpal tunnel syndrome during your pregnancy. They can be practised either sitting in a chair with your back straight, or standing with your feet a little apart.

1. Stretch your arms out in front of you at shoulder height. Spread your fingers wide, then squeeze your hands into tight fists. Repeat this up to five times and hold each movement to receive the most benefit. Lightly shake your hands when you have completed the exercise.
2. Clench your fists and very slowly rotate them clockwise five times and then anticlockwise five times. As you do this, be aware of the deep stretch throughout your wrists and arms.
3. Stretch your arms out in front of you at shoulder height with palms facing down. Flex your hands upwards so that the palms are facing away from you and your fingers are pointing up. Reverse the movement and point your fingers down towards the floor. Repeat this five times, then lightly shake your hands.

Head and Neck Exercises: *Gardhanasanas*

This is an important group of exercises that helps to reduce tension in your neck and shoulders. Your neck plays a vital role in overall health because nerves from various parts of your body pass through it to your brain. If you are suffering from headaches and neck tension, regular practice of these exercises and the following shoulder exercises will provide you with welcome relief, and at the very least, will prevent the problem becoming worse.

These three exercises are best done slowly, with your upper body relaxed and your back straight. They can be done standing, sitting in a chair or sitting on the floor, with awareness that your back is straight and relaxed.

1. Lower your head towards your right shoulder, being careful not to lift your shoulder or become tense. Remember to keep the muscles in your neck and shoulders relaxed. Do not force your head over towards your shoulder in any way and only go as far as is comfortable. Hold this position for four or five breaths, return to the vertical, and repeat it to the left. This whole exercise can be repeated as many times as desired. The weight of your head will gently stretch the muscles at the side of your neck so there is no need to force the position. It is worth doing this exercise in front of a mirror to make sure your body is not leaning as you move your head.
2. Turn your head as far to the right as possible, holding it for a short time before centring and turning to the left. Repeat this five times each side, keeping your neck and shoulders relaxed at all times.

Caution: A full head rotation is never recommended, especially if you have a weak or injured neck.

3. Drop your head down so that your chin is close to your chest. Be aware of feeling a deep stretch through the muscles of your upper back, shoulders and the central muscles of your neck. Your head can also be taken back, but I do not recommend this if you have had a neck injury. If you are able to take your head back comfortably, slowly open and close your mouth so as to stretch the muscles of your throat. Again, the weight of your head will automatically cause your neck muscles to be stretched.

Shoulder Exercise: *Shandhachakra*

This exercise helps to free tension from your shoulders and upper body. It will assist in opening up your chest for more efficient breathing and also help prevent incorrect posture and round shoulders.

1. Stand with your feet slightly apart and your body relaxed.
2. Place your fingertips on your shoulders and make slow, large circles with your elbows so that your shoulders are rotating deeply in their sockets. Repeat this five times forwards and then five times backwards. When your elbows are forward, the stretch will be felt across your upper back and shoulders helping to relieve any tension in these parts of your body. As your elbows are back, the stretch is felt in your chest. Although this is a simple exercise, the way your back and shoulders will feel afterwards is evidence enough of its benefits. Lightly shake your arms and loosen your shoulders after the exercise is completed.

Chest Expansion with Deep Breathing: *Hasta Utthanasana*

There are many benefits from practising *hasta utthanasana*, particularly for your chest, arms, shoulders and upper back. When your arms are behind you, your chest is open and expands fully, which assists in efficient deep breathing. Many people hold tension in the muscles of their chest, upper back and shoulders and this exercise works on easing that tightness. It also helps to reduce tension in the muscles of your neck, especially when done with the head and neck exercises.

When this exercise is practised regularly, all the muscles of your upper body are massaged. Your arms are stretched and toned and your shoulder joints are kept flexible, mobile and free. Circulation is improved to your lungs and upper body. This is also a very appropriate exercise for people who have round shoulders, poor posture and inefficient breathing. People with respiratory disorders such as asthma or emphysema are encouraged to practise this exercise and the previous one as often as possible, especially before the breathing exercises. The Chest Expansion is one of the few postures to work deeply and thoroughly into your upper body. I recommend

practising it in the morning to loosen your body and at the end of the day to relieve any tightness that may have built up.

1. Stand with your body straight and your shoulders and arms relaxed. Place your right hand in front of your left hand. Keep your arms straight and relaxed.
2. Breathe in as you raise your arms up in front of your body, finishing the inhalation when your arms are above your head.
3. Breathe out as you take your arms back as far as possible while expanding your chest. When your chest is fully opened you will feel your shoulder blades come closer together and the muscles of your upper back squeeze gently.

Repeat this sequence five or more times, being aware to inhale and exhale deeply with your arm movements. The sequence also be repeated more slowly, taking two or three breaths to complete the exercise and holding your arms above your head for longer, to enjoy a full stretch in the upper body.

The Heavenly Stretch: *Tadasana*

This lovely posture stretches deeply yet gently throughout your spinal column, giving you the feeling of being tall, balanced and centred. The Heavenly Stretch helps remove congestion in the nerves and muscles of your spine, giving health and suppleness throughout your back. Your feet and lower leg muscles are strengthened and your feet receive extra benefits from balancing on your toes. It is helpful to focus on a stationary object before commencing the practice because it requires balance and steadiness to stretch while on your toes. If you are unsteady on your toes it is quite acceptable to practise this posture standing on flat feet.

The Heavenly Stretch is an excellent posture if constipation is a problem because it tones your abdominal muscles and intestinal area. To help overcome mild constipation, before breakfast drink two or three glasses of warm water with a squeeze of lemon juice and then practise the Heavenly Stretch, a side bend (page XX) and some spinal twists (page XX). This will often stimulate your liver and intestines enough to promote a normal bowel movement. It is a wonderfully natural way to restore normal bowel function without the use of laxatives.

1. Stand with your feet together or a little apart. Join your hands together in front of you with your palms facing upwards and your shoulders relaxed.
2. Breathe in as you raise your arms above your head, rising up onto your toes and balancing, with your palms facing the ceiling. Keep your shoulders relaxed and hold your breath briefly while you balance on your toes. It is not recommended that you hold your breath for lengthy periods during pregnancy, but a short pause is quite acceptable and will not cause you any distress.
3. Breathe out as you lower your arms and heels to the floor and return to the standing position. Repeat this five times.