Post Natal Yoga

If a student is returning to your class after giving birth, you want to be careful that she is getting a physical workout that is gentle, yet gives her the challenge she needs to regain strength. You also want to provide a practice that offers the mental release she needs from her demanding new role as a mother.

Physiology of the Postnatal Period

The first month after giving birth is a time to recuperate and adjust. Encourage your postnatal students to be patient with their bodies. The pelvic floor has been stretched significantly during birth and may even have been cut or torn to facilitate delivery. The cervix has to close back down from dilating to 10 centimeters (4 inches) and then stretching to let the baby pass through. The uterus shrinks a lot in the first few days, but it will take at least a month to return to its postpartum size, and the internal organs have to settle back into position after being crowded for so long. If the mother had a Caesarean section, the pelvic floor will be intact, but she has had a major abdominal surgery that will take several months to heal.

A new mom cannot expect her body to bounce back immediately. The baby and the afterbirth add up to only about 15 to 20 pounds of weight lost immediately. In the first week or two after giving birth, a new mom still has a lot of extra fluids in her system that are slowly being flushed out or reabsorbed. Her abdominals and the skin over the belly are loose after being stretched out during her pregnancy.

These first few weeks can also be hugely emotional as she learns to take care of her new baby and adjust to her role as a mother. This intense responsibility, combined with hormones that are still present in the system (and will remain for months if she is breast-feeding), can lead to mood swings and even depression.

A perfect remedy for all of this soreness and mental stress is a yoga class, but remember, your job as a teacher is to make sure your student is not rushing back into a practice her body is not ready for.

Easing Back into Practice

First, establish just how long it's been since your student gave birth. She may have practiced regularly during pregnancy, but she doesn't have the same body she had then—or ever before. The abdominals are the muscles most affected by pregnancy, and so they're an obvious set to focus on. Encourages students to
reacquaint themselves with this area, and to begin focusing on building core strength. This will create stability so their backs are supported as they move through the postures.

Some ways to improve core strength include front lying back extensions, such as locust and cobra postures, as well as seated twists, boat, and plank.

The shoulders and neck are another area that can be very sore in the postpartum period. Simply carrying a newborn around will strain the upper back, because the tendency is to hunch over the baby instead of standing up straight. Shoulder openers such as various chest expanders (clasping hands behind the back and reaching the hands away from the tailbone), cow’s face, eagle, and clock face next to a wall will help loosen the muscles in this area.

By the end of the first eight weeks of motherhood, the postpartum student should be ready to resume her regular practice, but remind her to listen to what her body is ready to do. Jumping and intense vinyasa or power yoga practice may still a bit ambitious until her abdominals are completely restored.

**The Importance of Rest**

Now that the baby is here, a new mom may face many physical and emotional challenges. This time is exciting, exhausting, thrilling, and scary. A new mother will be flooded with conflicting emotions while simultaneously trying to manage all the physical demands of parenthood. Taking time for complete relaxation at the end of class is a good way for her to recuperate and calm her mind. It may be the only time in the day she gets to focus on her own needs. Guided meditation and savasana will all help her give her body and mind a rest. Help your postnatal students use yoga to find healing and rejuvenation.

Some final points to consider when teaching a postnatal student:

**Encourage patience.** It took nine months and one birth to get to this place, so a new mother should give herself another nine months to get back to "normal." If she tries to rush the healing process, she could actually prolong it by aggravating any strained muscles, tears, or incisions. Encourage her to listen to what her body is ready to do. Focus on the center. A postpartum student's torso is usually the area that needs the most attention. Help her work on her abdominals and lower back by starting with gentle stretches and gradually moving into strength-building poses. Offer lots of chest and shoulder openers to ease soreness in the upper body.

**Turn the focus on her.** The early months of a baby's life are its most helpless.
Your student will be spending so much time caring for and worrying about this little person that she may neglect her own health and needs. Encourage her to relax and focus on herself while practicing, so she will be refreshed and ready to parent again after class.