

YOGA MOVES TO HELP EASE PERIMENOPAUSE

During your 40s, 50s and beyond, it's often helpful to embrace more calming, restorative fitness routines over high-intensity ones. Registered yoga teacher Petra Coveney shares some top moves to help alleviate common mind-body symptoms of perimenopause.



WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY: PETRA COVENEY.

ABDOMINAL BREATHING

Hormonal changes during perimenopause can result in increased levels of cortisol, the body's stress hormone. This, coupled with the challenges of sudden hot flushes, insomnia and general life changes, can create chronic stress.

BENEFITS *If you are suffering from anxiety and stress, abdominal breathing is the perfect way to still your body and mind.*

WHAT TO DO

- Lie on your back with your knees

bent and your feet on the floor, hip-distance apart.

- Rest the palms of your hands on your abdomen, around your belly button.

● As you breathe in through your nose, allow the breath to travel down into your abdomen so that you can feel your belly rise into the palms of your hands.

● As you exhale, allow your belly to soften towards the mat beneath you. Imagine the abdomen is like a parachute that billows with the warm air beneath, and deflates softly as you exhale.

- Next, take a deep breath in through your nose and, as you

exhale, sigh out of your mouth making a "haaaa" sound. Slow down your exhalation so that it is longer than your inhalation.

It should sound soothing. This will calm your nervous system.

● Continue this style of breathing, focusing your attention on the movement of your breath through your body.

● End by sitting in a comfortable position with your eyes closed and noticing how you feel.

● If you like, you can add positive affirmations for a few minutes of the exercise, such as, "I am safe, I am well", or "I am peaceful, I am calm". Repeat 10 times.



ALTERNATE NOSTRIL BREATHING

Sudden outbursts of rage or irritability can be common during the perimenopause, as the loss of oestrogen can also cause a decline in serotonin, which contributes to mood swings and even depression.

During the Menopause Yoga sessions that I run, I include a number of meditation exercises that help attendees learn how to de-escalate those feelings of irritability before they explode!

BENEFITS Alternate nostril breathing can give you a sense of emotional equilibrium as it balances the left and right hemispheres of your brain. In yoga terms, we call this balancing the hot, dynamic (sun) energy and the

cool, calming (moon) energy. This is particularly beneficial if you are experiencing sudden outbursts of rage or irritability.

WHAT TO DO

- Touch your first two fingers lightly in the centre of your eyebrows – this is an acupressure point that is known to help calm your mind.

- Take a deep breath in through both nostrils, pause at the top of your breath, then slowly exhale through both nostrils.

- Next, imagine you are only breathing in through your left nostril, pause at the top of your breath, then imagine you are only breathing out of your right


nostril. Pause at the bottom of your exhalation.

- Then, imagine you are breathing through the right nostril, pause, then breathe out of your left nostril.

- Continue to imagine breathing in through alternate nostrils, for 10 more rounds of breath.

- Alternatively, you can close off your right nostril with your thumb and only breathe in through the left. Pause, then close the left nostril with your ring finger and breathe out of the right nostril. Breathe in through the right, close again and breathe out of the left. Continue for around 10 breaths.

- Afterwards, sit quietly and see whether your sensation of irritability or rage has subsided.



‘Outbursts of rage can be common during perimenopause, as the loss of oestrogen can cause a decline in serotonin, leading to mood swings.’



DOWNWARD FACING DOG

This is another helpful pose for managing stress or anxiety during perimenopause. It's an inversion pose – where your head is lower than your heart – that subtly slows the heart rate and calms your nervous system.

Adding a prop to place gentle pressure on your forehead can also add to the sense of calm and can help to pacify your adrenal glands – these get overworked if you're stressed – and tap into the parasympathetic, or rest and digest, nervous system.

Practicing downward facing dog with the forehead on a block or bolster can be easily held for 2-3 minutes as there is less weight on your hands, wrists and shoulders.

PROPS REQUIRED A mat, a bolster and some cushions – enough so that

the bolster reaches up to your head when in the final pose.

BENEFITS Calms your nervous system. Staying in the pose helps stretch your spine and backs of the legs, which can bring about a feeling of physical and emotional release.

WHAT TO DO

- Set up your bolster against three blocks so it slopes down diagonally. Position yourself on all fours in front of the bolster, with your hands placed on either side of the bottom of the bolster.
- Lift your knees away from the floor, reaching your hips up and back to come into downward dog.
- Rest your head on the bolster and remain in this position for 3 mins.

Petra's note: 'While yoga cannot replace the loss of oestrogen, which is the underlying cause of most menopause symptoms, it can be very effective when part of a holistic package of self-care that may also include nutritional advice, complimentary therapies (massage, acupuncture, etc), counselling and HRT. Yoga can help alleviate some menopause symptoms, but not all, and you're always advised to consult your GP.'

CHILD'S POSE

Menopausal anxiety and feeling overwhelmed are often caused by low oestrogen levels, which affect your cognitive brain function. Anxiety can also be triggered by stress, hot flushes and fatigue, caused by lack of sleep. Anxiety creates a feeling of tightness in the throat and shallow breathing so you feel you cannot take in enough air, which can make you panic.

These symptoms are best managed with slow, mindful movement accompanied by a steady breath to move this anxious energy. Carrying out "ocean breathing" while in child's pose (listening to the gentle sound of your breath and slowing down your exhalation), will also help to soothe both body and mind.

BENEFITS *Child's pose is a simple pose for stretching your hips and spine as well as calming your mind. It is a go-to pose that can be practiced for any of the perimenopause symptoms, but is especially soothing when you're feeling overwhelmed, as it activates the acupressure points on the crown of your head and forehead to feel instantly calming.*

PROPS REQUIRED A mat, bolster cushion or yoga block.

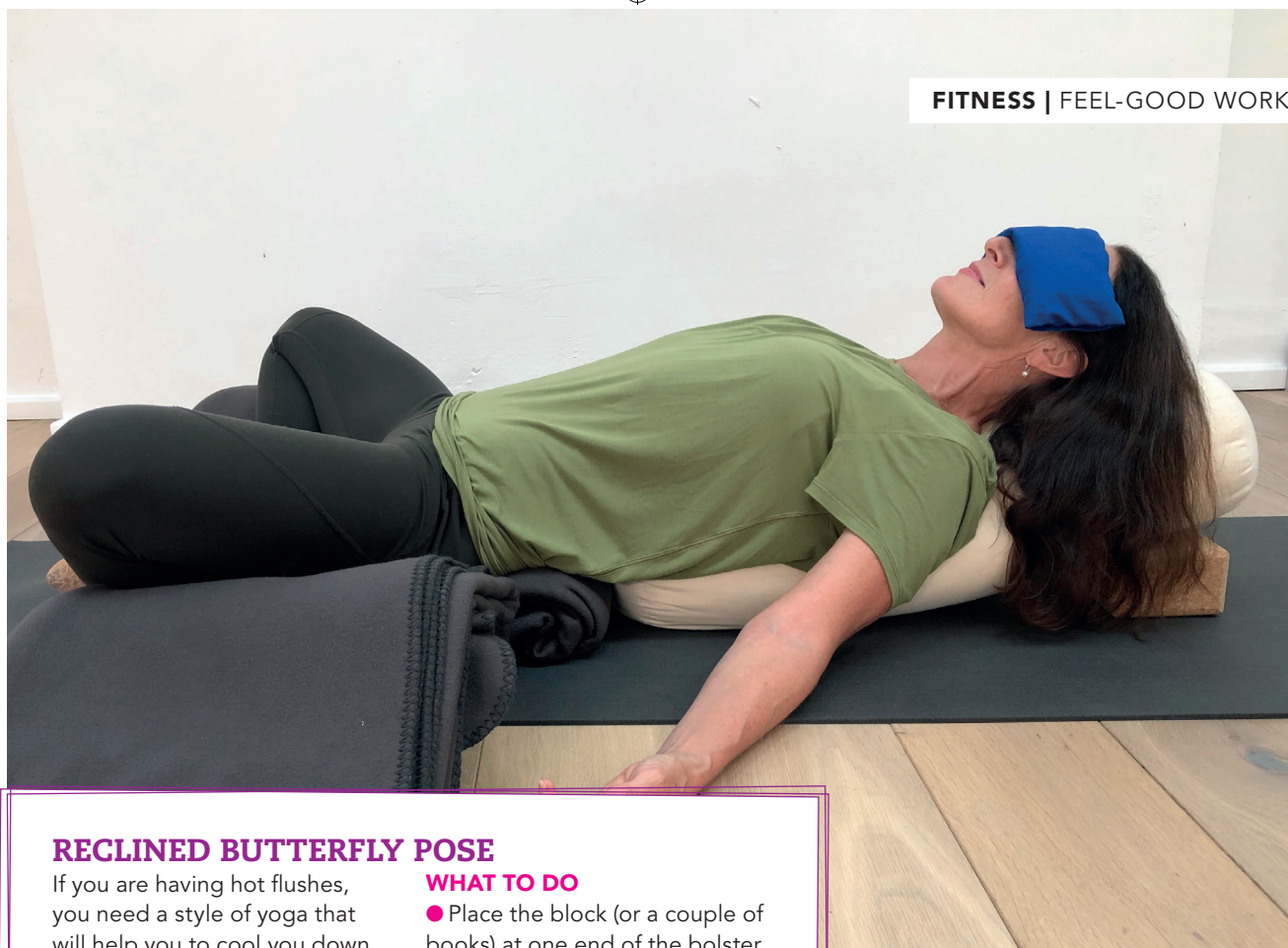
WHAT TO DO

- Start by kneeling on your mat and separating your knees out to the sides with your big toes touching.

- Lengthen your arms and reach your hands forward, slowly lowering your chest towards the mat.
- Rest your forehead onto your hands or stack your fists on top of each other. Alternatively, use a yoga block or chair to rest on if the forward fold is not comfortable. You can have your head facing one side – if so, turn your head the other way half way through.
- Using a bolster cushion to support the front of your chest, and even hugging the end of the bolster with your arms, can feel comforting – as if you were hugging a cuddly teddy!
- Stay in the pose for 5-10 mins.
- To come out of the pose, press down into your hands to lift your chest and slowly sit upright.



‘Perimenopause is the medical term given to the stage when a woman’s fertility hormones are fluctuating and, eventually, depleting in the lead up to menopause. This can cause a variety of symptoms including increased stress, hot flushes and night sweats, anxiety, mood swings and insomnia.’



RECLINED BUTTERFLY POSE

If you are having hot flushes, you need a style of yoga that will help you to cool you down physically and emotionally. Gentle yoga poses, cooling breathing techniques and calming meditation can all help. Rather than resisting and fearing hot flushes, relax and soften into them so they flow through you and pass more swiftly. Resisting them will only make them last longer, feel hotter and more overwhelming. Poses such as reclined butterfly pose can really help.

BENEFITS *This pose releases physical heat through your arms, hips and thighs and has a calming effect on our emotions as you let go and relax.*

PROPS REQUIRED A yoga mat, bolster or a couple of firm long cushions, two yoga blocks or square cushions – and it is helpful to have an extra yoga block (or a thick book) to raise one end of the bolster, so it is slanted at an angle. An eye pillow is also helpful to shut out the light and help your mind find a sense of stillness and ease.

WHAT TO DO

- Place the block (or a couple of books) at one end of the bolster and beneath the cushions on each side of the mat. Lie down on the bolster and bring the soles of your feet together, allowing your knees to drop out to the sides.
- Place the cushions under your knees to support your legs.
- Gently place an eye pillow on your forehead or eyes.
- Breathe in through your nose and then open your mouth to gently breathe out, making a sighing sound. Notice how relaxing your lower jaw softens your face, and tension just melts away. After 4-6 rounds of this sighing breath, you may choose to close your mouth and just breathe slowly through your nose. You can extend the outbreath to increase relaxation.
- Rest in this position for 5-10 mins, allowing the physical sensation of heat to release from your hips, thighs and armpits. Enjoy the gentle opening stretch across your chest. Let the tension drain away and notice how the more you relax, the sooner the heat dissolves away.



Petra Coveney is a registered yoga teacher with Yoga Alliance Professionals, the leading professional body for yoga teachers and trainers. She is the founder of Menopause Yoga and author of the book *Menopause Yoga: A Holistic Guide to Supporting Women on Their Menopause Journey* (£24.99, Singing Dragon). Yoga Alliance Professionals is a leading body for yoga teachers and trainers. To find out more details, simply visit yogaallianceprofessionals.org.