

fitness+health

Nutty for neti pots

• Nasal washes and the use of “neti pots” are gaining favor as a more natural, nonpharmaceutical way to clear the nose of allergens and other contaminants.

By SARAH MORAN
Special to the Star Tribune

When Emma Harness’ friends walk into her dorm room and find her pouring saltwater up her nose, they tend to become “concerned.”

But the St. Olaf sophomore explains that her five-year nasal wash habit helps with allergies, colds and sinus problems. Then her friends inevitably ask, “Can you do that again?”

So she mixes salt with warm water in her neti pot, a ceramic pot designed for nasal rinsing. The 19-year-old tilts her head and places the spout in one nostril. The water flows up into her sinuses and then streams out the opposite nostril. Harness turns her head and repeats on the other side.

Never before has salt water up the nose been so popular.

Sales at the Himalayan Institute, a major U.S. neti pot manufacturer, have increased more than 400 percent in the past 10 years. And in the first eight months of 2007, they’ve seen a 100 percent increase over 2006, thanks in part to a plug from Dr. Oz on Oprah Winfrey’s show early this year.

Local natural foods stores, including Mississippi Market in St. Paul and the Wedge and Whole Foods in Minneapolis, all report a steady rise in year-over-year neti pot sales.

“I’ve heard some pretty excellent feedback from [customers] that it’s a nice alternative to taking a lot of medication,” said Mindy Hauge of Whole Foods. After the Oprah show, “there were just multiple people a day coming in really wanting one, and now that it’s getting to be the fall season, we still have at least one person a day.”

Park Nicollet Clinic allergist Brenda Guyer, M.D., has been recommending the nasal wash to patients for about six years. “Neti pots are really effective,” she said. “They help with a host of problems.”

Now’s the perfect time to give it a

try; Guyer said Minnesota is at “peak misery” for allergies. Until the first few frosts, usually early in October, ragweed and pollen are out in full force during September. On top of that, viruses that lead to colds are at their height in September and October.

But be warned: The neti pot can feel strange at first as you figure out the right angle and tilt of the head. Over time, it should feel comfortable if you’re doing it properly with the right water temperature and amount of noniodized salt.

“I’ve had so many successes with it,” Guyer said. She’s used a two-pronged approach for many patients by writing a prescription and suggesting a neti pot. During followup appointments, “it’s not infrequent that they haven’t taken the prescription but they’re using the neti pot and say, ‘That’s the best thing you recommended.’”

Neti pots, which usually run \$10 to \$20, are available at some pharmacies, natural food stores, co-ops and online retailers (see www.netipot.org for an instructional video that won awards after its YouTube debut).

Harness’ mom, Kathy Palmer, is another neti pot fan who has made fewer trips to the doctor and spent less on medicine since she started using it 15 years ago. At the time, she had de-

veloped allergies to her cats and frequent sinus infections. The neti pot was a daily routine.

“It really reduced the pressure I’d feel in my head with the sinus infection, and I think it shortened how long I would have them,” the Minneapolis resident said. “It’s nice if you don’t have to go to the doctor, and it just feels healthier if you can do some things on your own.”

Although nasal wash techniques have been around for thousands of years — originally it was used in India by people practicing yoga and meditation so they could breathe easier — an increasing desire to use natural healing methods is boosting the neti pot’s prominence, said Marge Watkins, a spokeswoman for the Himalayan Institute.

“People are becoming more conscious, wanting to use less medication and less invasive treatments,” she said. “Across the board, people are looking for ways they can improve their health more naturally.”

Sarah Moran is a Minneapolis health writer.



Photos provided by THE HIMALAYAN INSTITUTE
Saltwater goes in one nostril and out the other, in the process clearing out allergens.



ABOUT NETI POTS

What is it and how does it work?

It’s a small pot used for nasal washing. You mix a little noniodized salt with warm water and place the spout in one nostril. The saline solution pours up the nose and through the sinuses, clearing out contaminants and allergens. Then the water pours back out the other nostril. The process is repeated on the opposite side.

Where can I find one?

Natural food stores, including Whole Foods and co-ops, pharmacies and online retailers. They usually cost between \$10 and \$20.

What are the benefits?

Doctors and users say there are many benefits, including:

- Clearing pollution and allergens

(such as pollen or mold) from the nose.

- Cutting down on allergy symptoms by clearing out mucus.
- Reducing pressure in the sinuses.
- Reducing cold symptoms.
- Shortening the length and frequency of sinus infections.
- Offsetting the effects of breathing dry air.
- Saving money and time on over-the-

counter medicine, prescriptions and doctor visits.

- Easier breathing during meditation and yoga.
- Helps with postnasal drip and nasal congestion, especially for smokers.
- Useful for cleaning out contaminants from lake water after swimming or waterskiing.

SARAH MORAN



Getting enough sleep is essential to health, happiness and productivity. Here's how to give your slumber the priority it deserves.

By SARAH MORAN

• Z..... When life gets busy, the first thing we often sacrifice is sleep. We're racing to finish that project for work, so we rise an hour earlier than usual. Or we retire a little later each night as we squeeze in some late-night chores. We know sleep is important, but how much can it hurt if we cut back a little in the name of productivity?

A lot. In fact, it turns out that adequate sleep and peak productivity go hand in hand. That's because proper rest improves our ability to concentrate, learn, remember, and to better manage busy, stressful times. It's essential to proper immune function and general good health (and what busy person has time to get sick?). What's more, research has shown that getting enough sleep can curb obesity, anxiety and depression — it even helps regulate blood pressure.

Sleep is an essential priority, not something we should fit in when we can. Getting enough of it can feel like a luxury in our fast-paced lives, but, really, it's a necessity for surviving — and thriving — in hectic times.

Boost Your Brain

Some muscles in the body can restore themselves by relaxing between activities; the brain isn't one of them. It needs more than simple inactivity to function properly — it needs the restorative effects of sleep.

A 2000 study by researchers at the University of California, San Diego, published in the journal *Nature*, found that the region of the brain responsible for verbal learning was active in properly rested study participants and inactive in sleep-deprived subjects. But the region of the brain associated with memory, called the parietal region, kicked in when sleep-deprived participants took part in the verbal-learning exercises, indicating that the brain can help compensate for its sleep-deprived deficiencies by getting other regions of the brain to "cover" for the affected region.

When this occurs, though, overall brain functioning suffers — and not just minimally. Researchers in Australia and New Zealand, for example, have found that drivers who had been awake for 17 to 19 hours before getting behind



You Snooze, You Win

the wheel performed worse than drivers with a blood-alcohol level of 0.05 percent.

Lack of sleep also affects mood. Kathy Sexton-Radek, PhD, a clinical psychologist and professor of psychology at Elmhurst College in Elmhurst, Ill., estimates that lack of sleep contributes to depression and anxiety in nearly 40 percent of the patients she sees.

"You need to regard sleep as an investment you're making in yourself, rather than something you have to do or something you think of as downtime," she says.

Rebuild Your Body

While you slumber, you're body is far from idle. During sleep, the body produces cytokines, cellular hormones that help your immune system fight infections. Sleep also promotes the production of human growth hormone (HGH), which repairs muscle and tissue. Missing shuteye, says sleep specialist Peter Freebeck, MD, decreases physical endurance and increases baseline heart rate.

An ongoing study at Stanford University is comparing well-rested college athletes with their comparatively sleep-deprived teammates. In every sport, from basketball to swimming, the athletes getting more sleep are significantly improving their performance, says psychiatry professor William Dement, MD, PhD, founder of the world's first sleep lab. The athletes also reported increased energy and improved mood.

Getting enough sleep is an essential element of achieving and maintaining a proper weight. In the book *Lights Out: Sleep, Sugar and Survival* (Simon and Schuster, 2000), T. S. Wiley and Bent Formby, PhD, describe “at least 10 different hormones, as well as many more neurotransmitters in the brain, that go sideways when you don’t sleep enough.” Among these are leptin, which regulates metabolism and appetite, and melatonin, an antioxidant. These hormonal changes can lead to obesity and diabetes. (See “Getting to Sleep” in the November 2004 archives at experiencelifemag.com.)

“You can sleep for six hours a night and be a zombie for 18 hours, or you can sleep for eight hours a night and be a superman or superwoman for 16 hours a day.”

Sleep might also be one of the keys to living healthier, longer. A 2003 study by Finnish researchers surveyed 1,600 adults, ages 36 to 50, in Tampere, Finland, about their sleep habits and health. As Dement and Christopher Vaughan report in their book, *The Promise of Sleep: A Pioneer in Sleep Medicine Explores the Vital Connection Between Health, Happiness and a Good Night’s Sleep* (Dell, 2000), the results are unequivocal: “Compared to good sleepers, male poor sleepers were 6.5 times more likely to have health problems, and female poor sleepers were 3.5 times more likely to have health problems.”

Right Your Rhythms

Sleep specialists stress the importance of respecting the body’s natural clock, or circadian rhythm, which influences alertness, temperature and hormones throughout the day. Although your circadian rhythm is genetically set, a regular sleep pattern can retrain your body’s clock for sleeping and waking times that fit your schedule. The consistency will also help you fall asleep and wake up more easily, says Freebeck. He recommends going to bed and waking up within an hour of a set time every day, including weekends.

Getting regular, consecutive hours of sleep also matters. Your sleep occurs in five stages, ranging from lightest to deepest within 90- to 110-minute cycles. The first part of the night features deeper stages that rest the brain. Early-morning hours are heavier in rapid eye movement (REM), or the dream state, when the body is more relaxed. Since different processes occur throughout the night, it’s best to string together, uninterrupted, four to six cycles, or seven to nine hours. Each of these cycles is equally important, Freebeck says, as the first hours rejuvenate the brain and the last hours help the body recover.

To begin to get more sleep, tack on 15 minutes of sleep each night for a week, suggests New York University professor of medicine Joyce Walsleben, RN, PhD, a member of

the NYU Sleep Disorders Center. If bedtime is 11 p.m., shift it to 10:45 p.m. The next week, shoot for 10:30 p.m., and so on. Continue until you wake up on your own, refreshed.

Keep in mind that stimulants like caffeine and sugar, taken too close to bedtime, can keep you awake — and hurt your quality of sleep. Alcohol can disrupt sleep. Lights, even the glow from a computer or TV, signal your body to stay awake. Even catching up with your email before you turn in makes it harder to drift off because your body gets into task mode. Instead, try reading, journaling, listening to relaxing music or soaking in a warm bath (see “Bookends” in the May/June 2003 archives at experiencelifemag.com). It’s ideal to transition into these activities an hour before bedtime.

Try setting goals for sleep duration, consistency and quality, Freebeck says. Address disruptions to those goals, and if you still don’t feel rested, it might be time to consult a doctor to see if you might have sleep apnea or another undiagnosed sleep disorder.

If it turns out that the biggest barrier to your getting enough sleep is simple lack of time, or if you’re trading off sleep in the interest of “getting more done,” Dement would have you reconsider your choices: “You can sleep for six hours a night and be a zombie for 18 hours,” he says. “Or you can sleep for eight hours a night and be a superman or superwoman for 16 hours a day.” ●

Sarah Moran is a writer based in Minneapolis.

Get **Some Sleep!** Your body needs rest. Here’s how to make it happen.

- **Get to bed 15 minutes earlier** each night for a week until you start waking up refreshed, without an alarm. This will help you identify how much sleep your body needs to perform well.
- **Settle on an appropriate nighttime sleep schedule** and stick to it within an hour or so, even on weekends.
- **Avoid sacrificing your sleep** — for work or play. Give your slumber the same priority as your workouts and nutrition. Start winding down an hour before bed, and eliminate stimulants or distractions that are likely to keep you awake.

Look past surface for beauty products

• Many ingredients used in cosmetics are linked to serious health concerns. If you don't want to wait for the jury to finish debating the risk, here's how to find safe alternatives.

By SARAH MORAN • Special to the Star Tribune

Imagine applying a tube of lead to your lips, brushing mercury onto your lashes and slathering lotion with carcinogens onto your skin. Doesn't sound too attractive, right? But it's a scene that's unfolding in many U.S. households every morning.

As concern grows over the safety of commonly used cosmetic ingredients, so does frustration among consumers trying to sort out the dangerous from the divine. When's the last time you read — or understood — the ingredients in the shampoo you lather on your scalp? And how many people know that the ingredient thimerosal is made of mercury?

Most likely, your bathroom beauty products

are made with not-so-gorgeous ingredients, including lead, mercury, parabens, phthalates and other known human carcinogens. Many of these chemicals mimic human hormones, especially estrogen, and may disrupt your body's natural hormone system, which is responsible for directing cell division, gene expression, growth, reproduction and brain and nervous system development.

"It's really important for people to understand you can absorb chemicals through the skin," said Ann Louise Gittleman, a beauty expert and nutrition specialist. "Remember, the skin is an organ."

Cosmetics continues: Five tips for staying gorgeous without risking your health. **E8** ▶



GARY MARKSTEIN • MCT

Look past surface for beauty products

◀ COSMETICS FROM E1

Studies show that people are absorbing these chemicals. Parabens have been found in breast tumor tissue, for example. This chemical preservative acts like the hormone estrogen in the body, and increased exposure to estrogen increases the risk of breast cancer.

The Food and Drug Administration recently released results from its study of 22 lipsticks. All contained lead.

The Environmental Working Group, a nonprofit consumer advocacy group, studied 20 teenage girls from across the country last year. Their blood and urine samples contained 16 toxic chemicals commonly found in cosmetics and many of which are associated with serious health risks in lab animals, even at low doses.

"These are not trace contaminants like those found at part-per-million or even part-per-billion levels in food and water," states the Environmental Working Group's website regarding risky chemicals used in cosmetics. "These are the base ingredients of the product, just as flour is an ingredient in bread."

The FDA doesn't approve cosmetic ingredients, aside from color additives, and cosmetics manufacturers are allowed to use nearly any ingredient they wish.

Although there's debate over how much exposure is safe and how directly these chemicals are linked to serious health consequences, more people are choosing to skip the hemming and hawing and err on the side of safety.

In 2008, Minnetrista resident Ann Garrity left the company she founded to start a new business to guide confused consumers. As president of Organicdivas.com, Garrity distributes products that she's meticulously screened for safety and tested for effectiveness. Many of her customers have had breast cancer, infertility or other health issues that drove them to consider the full picture of their health.

"People looking for healthier options are being misled by some companies who imply their products are better by using words like 'organic' and 'natural,'" she said. "It really ticks me off."

Garrity, Gittleman and Rebecca Sutton, senior scientist for the Environmental Working Group, share five tips that take the headache out of getting gorgeous.

Be a sleuth. Don't be fooled by labels with pictures of pretty trees that say "organic" or "natural." Always read the ingredient list. Although you're more likely to find safer products at a co-op grocery

store or natural foods store, never assume that every product there is safe.

Bookmark the Environmental Working Group's website, where you can:

- Search for a particular product at www.cosmeticsdatabase.com. If the Environmental Working Group has evaluated the product whose name you enter, you'll learn where it ranks on a 0 to 10 toxicity scale as well as any potential concerns about its ingredients. Use the advanced search to enter a product category, such as blush, sunscreen or hair color, and learn which options the group considers safe.

- Download a basic wallet guide to keep in your pocket at <http://ewg.org/node/26958>.

- Learn more about some of the ingredients to avoid at www.cosmeticsdatabase.com/special/whatnotobuy/.

Try www.organicdivas.com. All the products sold on this site meet the following requirements:

- The company signed the Compact for Safe Cosmetics, a pledge to avoid cancer-causing and hormone-disrupting chemicals.

- The products rank no worse than a 3 on the Environmental Working Group's 0-10 toxicity scale.

- The company discloses all ingredients.

- Organic Divas product testers approved the quality and effectiveness.

- On this site you can print out a comprehensive "Dirty Dozen" list of ingredients to avoid, developed by Gittleman and available at www.organicdivas.com/dirtydozen.html. Request a Dirty Dozen card to keep in your wallet at www.organicdivas.com/card.html.

Spend wisely. Organicdivas.com has products that range from \$2.50 to \$150. Garrity said prices are often similar to what you'd find at Macy's or Herbergers. If that's more than you usually spend, try using fewer cosmetics. Take a day off each week from makeup. Or buy items that do double-duty, such as a blush that also works as eye shadow. Use milder soaps so you'll need less moisturizing.

Be wary of the word "fragrance." Instead of detailing each ingredient that makes up a scent, companies can list "fragrance" as the ingredient. This could be covering up unattractive ingredients. Plus, fragrance, even when it's truly natural, is a common allergen and irritant. It may be the culprit if you have blotchy skin, redness or rashes.

Sarah Moran is a freelance health writer in Minneapolis.

HOW I GOT THIS BODY MASON JENNINGS, 34, SINGER/SONGWRITER WHO PRACTICES MEDITATION AND YOGA, MINNEAPOLIS



SCOTT SOENS

OM BODY

By SARAH MORAN
Special to the Star Tribune

As Minnesota singer/songwriter Mason Jennings travels the country performing tunes from his latest album, "Blood of Man," he doesn't leave his yoga mat and meditation practice behind. The folksy pop artist finds creativity, peace and gratitude from a consistent practice. In advance of his Minneapolis show Nov. 22 at First Avenue, Jennings talked about his love of the Boundary Waters, the hum of the Earth and learning meditation from a woman who helped teach the Beatles.

Q What kind of routine do you keep with yoga and meditation while touring?

A For the last five years I've done transcendental meditation every day. I wake up in the morning and do 20 minutes of sitting meditation with my mantra, and in the afternoons I try to find a place somewhere private at the club or theater we're at to do another 20 minutes. At least twice a week I try to find a Bikram yoga studio on the road. It's made a huge difference. Meditation was the first thing I got into. I had a lot of panic attacks and anxiety on the road, changing cities every night. I couldn't figure out how to get that under control, but I wanted to do it without medication or drugs. I was introduced to my meditation teacher Nancy DeHerrera — she was a liaison between the Beatles, Dono-

van and the Maharishi — and it was a massive change for me. Suddenly I wasn't having panic attacks, and I felt really centered. I found a great sense of peace and a sense of a higher power.

Q And when you're back in Minnesota?

A That's one of my favorite things when I get home — I can't wait to get back to my favorite yoga studios and practice more. At home I try to go as much as I can, maybe five days a week.

Q What difference have meditation and yoga practice made in your life?

A Personally I have a lot more faith in a higher power, though I can't explain that, but every time I practice meditation I feel a sense of peace and bliss. When you feel that, it changes your life right way. When I started meditation I didn't have any more anxiety issues, and when I started doing yoga I felt so much better. I haven't been sick this year, I've felt really strong and healthy and good. Professionally, I can sing a lot better now that I'm doing yoga and I have more lung capacity. I also feel more able to take risks and experiment with my work, because I feel like I can handle it physically.

Q You traveled to Patagonia recently to work on music for the upcoming documentary, "180 Degrees South." What was it like to

practice meditation there?

A It was amazing. Anytime you can be somewhere away from all the cell phone interference and electronics, you can actually hear the Earth hum.

Q You've said people need to stay inspired by life and keep a sense of wonder. How do you do that?

A For sure, meditation and yoga keep me in that state. As soon as you start to meditate, you start feeling grateful — it's the first feeling that comes into your heart. Also with yoga it's interesting because you don't ever get "good" at it, it's not a competition — you're just always trying to get more in tune with your body. Engaging in this beautiful practice keeps a sense of wonder for me. As an artist I try to treat everything as art — find creativity in everything and have that sense of play and fun.

Q Where in Minnesota do you feel the most contemplative, insightful or creative?

A For me it's the Boundary Waters, going up there and hanging out in the North Woods. That's a magical place, I think. There's nowhere else I've been that's like that in this world. I feel really lucky that we live so close to that area. Anywhere in Minnesota — I'm forever fascinated with that place. When I go all over the country, every state has a certain vibe. You come to Minnesota, and there's this confluence of energy. I get really inspired when I'm there.

CONTACT US If you or someone you know would be a good candidate for "How I Got This Body," e-mail us at body@startribune.com and include your name, age, contact information and an explanation of your fitness story.



Krista Margolis was among more than a dozen women in a prenatal yoga class at Blooma in Edina recently.

JEFF WHEELER • jwheeler@startribune.com

Buy local for holidays, group urges

● A think tank says shoppers can jump-start the state's economy by looking for products made in Minnesota.

By JOHN EWOLDT
jewoldt@startribune.com

A St. Paul-based think tank wants to expand the "buy local" mantra this holiday season to strengthen Minnesota's economy.

Minnesota2020, which believes it makes economic sense to support local manufacturers and retailers when possible, said it makes even more sense now. Regarding employment and personal income, Minnesota is struggling at a rate slightly worse than the national average, state economist Tom Stinson said.

The just-released report — "Made in MN 2008: Boosting Minnesota's Economy in Tough Economic Times" — states that if Minnesotans spent one-fourth of their holiday budgets on items made in Minnesota, more than \$2 billion would trickle into the state's economy, possibly causing small and local businesses to hire more employees.

Local continues: Convenience of ten trumps good intentions. **E8** ▶

The bloom of birth

Hoping to conceive? Pregnant? Blooma, a center with everything from prenatal yoga classes to workshops on eco-conscious baby care, offers resources and support.

BY SARAH MORAN • Special to the Star Tribune

Glowing candlelight dances around a warm, cozy room as 20 women breathe melodically, each holding a twisty yoga pose.

"Notice what you're fighting — see if you can open into that. It's great practice for birth," says prenatal yoga instructor Sarah Longacre as the stretch deepens. "How much is this opening your hips?" she asks.

"A lot!" one woman answers with a laugh.

"A lot — think of a whole 2 inches extra for baby," Longacre says. A spirited and warm woman with a quick smile and wavy blond hair, Longacre, 32, gently guides the expectant mamas out of the twist and into a squatting position. "Listen to the wisdom you have, the intuition you have. You know exactly how to birth your baby.

You know exactly how to be a mother," she tells them.

The desire to help women believe in themselves and trust the beautiful process of birth is part of the reason that a year ago in Edina, Longacre opened Blooma, a center for all things parent and baby.

"Pregnancy is a time to really begin to focus inward. You end up taking a step back and taking inventory," said Longacre, who is also a doula, a woman trained to focus on and support women emotionally and physically before, during and after birth. At Blooma, parents can get educated about all their birthing options.

"What I say to moms all the time is, 'You're not sick; you're not weak. You're strong and you are pregnant, and yeah, you might have heartburn and all this other stuff going on, but let's work through that.'"

Birth continues: Pros and cons to medical intervention. **E8** ▶



Left to right: Amy Miles, Ruby Karp, Amy Poehler, Meredith Walker on "Smart Girls at the Party."

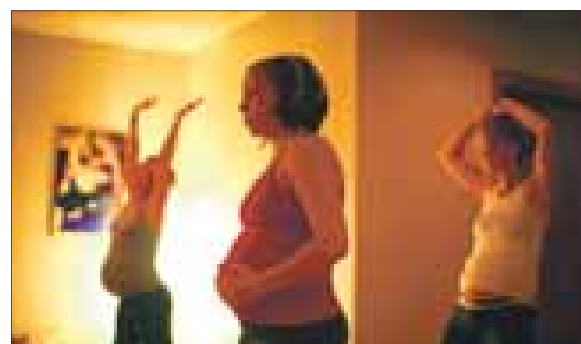
GIRLS GOING MOBILE

Amy Poehler may have left the cast of "Saturday Night Live," but you can see her latest venture on a cell phone, an iPod or even a crusty old TV. The digital series "Smart Girls at the Party," aimed at tween girls, is downloadable at Onnetworks.com. Each 5- to 10-minute episode features a conversation between Poehler and a different girl, from a 10-year-old paranormal fiction writer to a young yoga expert. They are "changing the world by being themselves," says Poehler, who just gave birth to a girl herself. The series was recorded in HD so it's just as watchable on a 3-inch screen as it is on a 46-inch. Episodes can be viewed or downloaded free at www.smartgirlsattheparty.com and through syndication partners including iTunes, Adobe Media Player and other digital and mobile service providers. □

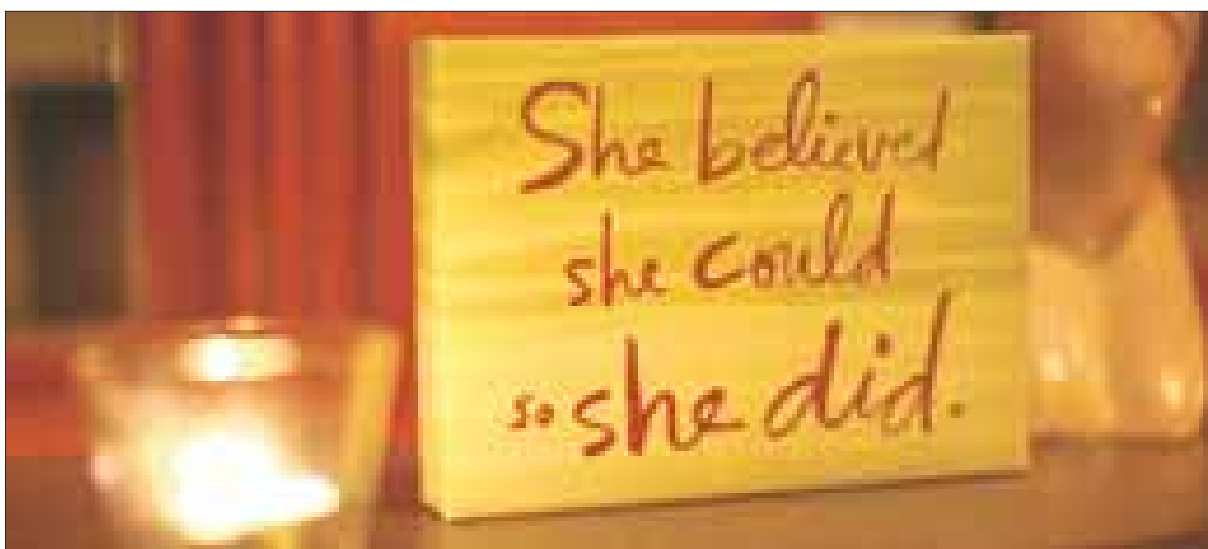
KRISTIN TILLOTSON



RENEE JONES SCHNEIDER • reneejones@startribune.com
Chris Staloch of Victoria put his hand alongside his wife Sara's during a couples prenatal yoga class at Blooma. The class teaches relaxation techniques for labor and delivery.



JEFF WHEELER • jwheeler@startribune.com
Carla Beveridge, foreground, along with Katie Frodermann, left, and Krista Margolis, right, attended a yoga class taught by the founder of the year-old studio, Sarah Longacre, at left.



JEFF WHEELER • jwheeler@startribune.com

The evening prenatal class at Blooma is lit by candles and lights dimmed way down low.

BLOOMA

- See www.blooma.com for more information or for a schedule of classes and events. 952-848-1111, 3919 44th St., Edina.
- Watch for Blooma founder Sarah Longacre's prenatal yoga DVD in early 2009. The DVD will be available through www.blooma.com, at Blooma, at Core Power Yoga studios and through other retailers.

The bloom of birth

◀ BIRTH FROM E1

Blooma exemplifies a growing childbirth movement in this country. As Longacre said, "Women are taking back their birth; they're taking back their experience." They're realizing there are pros and cons to medical intervention and are considering more natural options, including home birth.

The Caesarean-section rate nationwide is at an all-time high of more than 30 percent, a 46 percent increase since 1996, according to the Centers for Disease Control. The rate of induction — above 22 percent — has more than doubled since 1990. At the same time, the preterm birth and low-birth-weight rates have continued to rise.

American women delivering in hospitals typically go through labor on their backs, a position that actually makes it harder for the baby to come out, rather than using positions such as squatting, standing, kneeling on all fours or birthing in water. But as more women learn about resources and options available to them and as they seek supported prenatal birth and postnatal

care by incorporating doulas and midwives, there's evidence of change.

Abbott Northwestern Hospital in Minneapolis treats women to massage, relaxation, meditation, aromatherapy and tubs. Hennepin County Medical Center in Minneapolis has staff doulas and staff midwives, who are trained to support women and may deliver babies. The number of HCMC midwives has doubled in the past 10 years, and the number of doula-attended births has gone from about 35 to 70 per month.

In Woodbury, Woodwinds Health Campus' Maternity Care, which recently received one of the top marks in patient satisfaction of any hospital in a Picker Institute study, incorporates volunteer doulas and massage therapists. They offer aromatherapy, music therapy, hydrotherapy tubs and birthing tubs, acupressure, acupuncture and healing touch. "People are becoming more and more aware of the care practices that make for a better birth," said Jeanette Schwartz, clinical director of maternity care at Woodwinds.

Relaxing away the fear

In addition to prenatal and postnatal yoga classes, Blooma offers massage, acupuncture, Lamaze, child care, chiropractic care and craniosacral therapy for expectant parents (and for people without kids). Blooma has classes such as hypnobirthing, breastfeeding and infant massage. Workshops include eco-conscious baby care, childbirth education and pre-conception health. Most Monday evenings a group called the Childbirth Collective holds discussions at Blooma on topics ranging from "Medications and interventions" to "Riding the hormonal wave of labor."

A one-stop center like Blooma was long overdue, said Sarah Tracy, a labor/birth registered nurse at a local hospital and a hypnobirthing instructor at Blooma.

Tracy's classes teach skills in relaxation, hypnosis, visualization and positive self-talk. "The basis of it is that when you can relax and focus your attention on what you want to happen within your body, your body can work in an op-

timal way," she said, explaining that hormones that women release when they are fearful or worried are the opposite of the hormones that aid a smoother, easier birth.

Kerri Rivers used massage, acupuncture, prenatal yoga and education classes at Blooma before her son Eliot was born nine months ago, with Longacre assisting.

"It completely prepared me to give birth in the way that I wanted to," the Minneapolis resident said. "My goal was to have a natural, unmedicated birth, and the yoga was a huge help in that."

Like Rivers, Laura Leventhal was initially scared about giving birth, but after going to Blooma regularly, both began to view labor and birth positively. Leventhal, of Minnetonka, found herself dropping by Blooma even when she didn't have class, because "it's such a welcoming, kind, loving environment."

"Sarah [Longacre] and Blooma have taught us so much about trusting ourselves and about the possibilities for gentle options in childbirth," she said. "I thank her for bringing that into our lives."

Sarah Moran is a freelance health writer in Minneapolis.