

Better Beginnings - The Benefits of Massage in Pregnancy

Pregnancy is a special time in a woman's life, filled with hope and excitement. However, it can also place a massive strain on the body resulting in a range of symptoms such as back pain, fatigue and heavy legs. Modern women often juggle busy lives and careers with many waiting until their 30s or 40s to have children. This can mean that the pregnancy is highly anticipated, possibly following years of trying or fertility treatment. So it is a shame if instead of being able to enjoy the experience women are miserable and wonder whether they will ever look or feel normal again.

So where does massage come into it? Well, in the past, it was normal for midwives to include therapies to help women prepare for birth, but Western society gradually became more medical in its approach. Recently the benefits of complementary techniques have been re-acknowledged, with the backing of midwives and doctors. Massage and other therapies have grown in popularity, as have options such as hypnobirthing and the use of water or home births. This means that they are no longer dismissed as something just for the rich or those of 'alternative' lifestyle.

Generally speaking having a touch treatment such as massage allows the body to cope with the various challenges the pregnancy places upon it. Of course, anything that allows the mother to feel more cared for, in turn nurtures the baby. Research at The University of Miami (Touch Institute) showed that massage not only feels great, it lessens stress levels in the body and can help reduce the length of labour and the incidence of postnatal depression.

Besides relaxation, massage can also help relieve the muscular tightness and pain that most women will experience in their pregnancy. A massage can ease these discomforts and also help keep the muscles flexible, which is very important for the third trimester and the birth. Massage also stimulates the lymphatic system which helps increase energy levels and reduce puffy limbs. Feeling more relaxed and with less ongoing discomfort releases endorphins, nature's feel good factor, which also reduces stress on the baby.

In my experience in working with pregnant women, the response to treatment is always total pleasure. Even those that are in pain or worried in some way, leave the therapy room looking and feeling lighter and brighter than when they walked in. Once they are lying on

their side, comfortably supported by special cushions, covered in a cosy sheet, with dim lighting and peaceful music in the background, they immediately feel better. Their breathing slows, they are almost asleep and then we begin the treatment. This level of 'almost sleeping' relaxation is great for grounding the mind-body-baby connection and women often report feeling a strong bond to the baby during and after the session. Postnatally, treatment can help the body readjust and ease any ongoing muscular pain, especially in the pelvic area.

Pregnancy massage is safe throughout the pregnancy as long as it is with a professionally trained therapist who understands the specific requirements of pregnancy. The treatment is adapted depending on the stages of the pregnancy and the individual mum-to-be's requirements. Sessions may include advice on exercises and stretches, partner workshops to teach supportive techniques for pregnancy and labour, and also post-natal work to support the body's readjustment after the birth. A voucher for treatment makes a lovely gift for the mum-to-be.

Jennifer Syme is a massage therapist who has a Diploma in Massage for Pregnancy and works with women and their partners to support them throughout their pregnancy. She is based at Napiers the Herbalists (Stockbridge and Bristo) and The Whole Works. More information can be found at www.jstherapies.co.uk or call Jennifer on 07847 101942.