

Benefits of Pre-Natal Massage

Therapeutic massage has been used for centuries to improve overall health, reduce stress, and relieve muscle tension. Massages during pregnancy have often received ambivalent responses from the health community regarding their safety and purpose. Modern investigation and research has shown that prenatal massage therapy can be an instrumental ingredient in women's prenatal care and should be given careful consideration.

Although most massage training institutions teach massage therapy for women who are pregnant, it is best to find a massage therapist who is certified in prenatal massage. The APA works with some massage therapists who are trained to work with pregnant women, but it is still important to ask about qualifications.

Studies indicate that massage therapy performed during pregnancy can reduce anxiety, decrease symptoms of depression, relieve muscle aches and joint pains, and improve labor outcomes and newborn health. Massage therapy addresses different needs through varying techniques, one of which is called Swedish Massage.

Swedish Massage aims to relax muscle tension and improve lymphatic and blood circulation through mild pressure applied to the muscle groups of the body. Swedish Massage is the recommended massage method during pregnancy because it addresses many common discomforts associated with the skeletal and circulatory changes brought on by hormone shifts.

Hormone regulation

Studies done in the past 10 years have shown that hormone levels associated with relaxation and stress are significantly altered when massage therapy is introduced to women's prenatal care. This leads to mood regulation and improved cardiovascular health.

In women who received bi-weekly massages for only five weeks, hormones such as norepinephrine and cortisol (hormones associated with stress) were reduced, and dopamine and serotonin levels were increased (low levels of these hormones are associated with depression).

These changes in hormone levels also led to fewer complications during birth and fewer instances of newborn complications, such as low birth weight. The evidence strongly suggests there are maternal and newborn health benefits when therapeutic massage is incorporated into regular prenatal care.

Reduction of swelling

Edema, or swelling of the joints during pregnancy, is often caused by reduced circulation and increased pressure on the major blood vessels by the heavy uterus. Massage helps to stimulate soft tissues to reduce collection of fluids in swollen joints. This also improves the removal of tissue waste carried by the body's lymph system.

Improvement of nerve pain

Sciatic nerve pain is experienced by many women in late pregnancy as the uterus rests on muscles of the pelvic floor and lower back. The pressure of the uterus spreads tension to the muscles of the upper and lower leg, causing them to swell and put pressure on nearby nerves.

Massage therapy addresses the inflamed nerves by helping to release the tension on nearby muscles. Many women have experienced a significant reduction in sciatic nerve pain during pregnancy through massage.

Other potential benefits of prenatal massage:

Reduced back pain

Reduced joint pain

Improved circulation

Reduced edema

Reduced muscle tension and headaches

Reduced stress and anxiety

Improved oxygenation of soft tissues and muscles

Better sleep

Precautions For Prenatal Massage

As with any therapeutic approach to pregnancy wellness, women should discuss massage with their prenatal care provider. The best way to address the risks of prenatal massage is to be informed and to work together with knowledgeable professionals.

Body position during prenatal massage

Many professionals consider the best position for a pregnant woman during massage is side-lying. Tables that provide a hole in which the uterus can fit may not be reliable and can still apply pressure to the abdomen, or allow the abdomen to dangle, causing uncomfortable stretching of the uterine ligaments. Consult your massage therapist before your first appointment to verify what position they place their clients in during the massage.

Seek an appropriate massage therapist

It is important to seek care from an experienced massage therapist. They are aware of how to position you safely and prevent strain to the uterine ligaments. They are also able to watch for symptoms of blood clots and varicose veins.

Women who have recently experienced bleeding, pre-term contractions, or have any of the following conditions should speak with a health care provider prior to receiving a massage:

High risk pregnancy

Pregnancy induced hypertension (PIH)

Preeclampsia

Previous pre-term labor

Experiencing severe swelling, high blood pressure, or sudden, severe headaches

Recently gave birth

Is Prenatal Massage Safe Throughout The Entire Pregnancy?

Women can begin massage therapy at any point in their pregnancy – during the first, second, or third trimester. Many facilities will refuse to offer massage to a woman who is still in her first trimester because of the increased risk for miscarriage associated with the first 12 weeks of pregnancy.

Prenatal Massage As Part Of Prenatal Care

The benefits of massage can improve overall prenatal health for many pregnant women. Along with the guidance and advice of a prenatal care provider, massage therapy can be incorporated into routine prenatal care as an emotional and physical health supplement shown to improve pregnancy outcome and maternal health. Consult with your midwife or obstetrician before beginning any new therapeutic practice.

~Information Courtesy of the American Pregnancy Association