

Perfect Pampering

Prenatal Massage Relieves Aches and Pains, Reduces Stress

Ladies, are you pregnant? As Dr. Phil would say, "How's that working out for you?"

Pregnancy is a time of incredible change. It introduces new feelings—both physical and emotional—into your body as it changes to accommodate the new life within you. The weight gain you experience greatly changes your center of gravity and posture, often leading to muscle strain and tension. Plus, these changes can be magnified depending on the level of anxiety and stress in your life.

Handling pregnancy-related aches and pains—as well as stress levels—is essential for a pregnant woman's good health and that of her baby. At every stage of the pregnancy, relaxation techniques will assist the baby's development and mom's own sense of well-being, helping to ensure a smooth pregnancy and delivery.

Many moms-to-be turn to prenatal massage therapy as a way to relax, increase energy levels, and address common areas of discomfort. Prenatal massage increases the flow of oxygen, blood, and nutrients to fetal cells and tissue, providing an optimum growth environment for baby. It also provides a special environment just for mom, so she can be nurtured and cared for at a time when so much attention is on the baby.

Is Massage Safe During Pregnancy?

Prenatal massage is absolutely safe during all phases of pregnancy when performed by a trained pregnancy massage professional. Therapists trained in prenatal massage techniques have specialized skills and knowledge that enable them to work most effectively on such side effects as nausea, fatigue, heartburn, headaches, all types of back pain, sciatica, sore hands and feet,

edema, and leg cramps.

A specially trained therapist knows how to position the pregnant woman during the massage to ensure her maximum comfort and safety for the baby. She will also know which parts of the woman's body not to work on, as there are certain areas that should not be stimulated until the woman goes into labor. The therapist may also be able to make recommendations for diet, exercise, or other self-care routines to help women manage the physical changes taking place.

Benefits of Pre-Natal Massage

Numerous studies have shown that women who receive massage while pregnant experience fewer side effects and have easier births than women who receive no massage. One study conducted by the University of Miami School of Medicine revealed that massage reduces stress hormones in the body, thereby reducing the possibility of a premature birth and increasing the likelihood of a successful full-term pregnancy.

During pregnancy, prenatal massage reduces strain on the abdominal, neck, shoulder, leg, hip, and back muscles. It softens and gently stretches tissue to reduce stretch marks. And it provides a quiet time for mom to relax and reflect.

Just prior to or during labor, prenatal massage can activate or shorten labor time by stimulating acupressure points that invigorate the uterus. Some women seek this treatment as an alternative when facing an induced labor. Massage also reduces the perception of pain through the release of endorphins, the body's natural pain killer. Finally, it relaxes and relieves muscle tension caused by contractions.

How Often Should One Receive Prenatal Massage?

How often a pregnant woman receives massage really depends on her time, finances, and level of comfort. While many side effects of pregnancy won't completely

go away until the baby is born, massage can help women better manage them.

In the first trimester, when nausea and fatigue may occur, women opt for monthly sessions. During the second trimester, when that pregnancy euphoria sets in, many women report feeling at their best. They may continue monthly massages or opt for every other week if pain or discomfort arises. The third trimester—especially moving into the last six to eight weeks—might warrant weekly sessions if sciatica, hip pain, edema, or back pain increases. Ultimately, a woman should make the decision based on how she feels in her body and how she is able to adapt to the changes.

True Benefits Revealed

Heather Goodrich received bimonthly prenatal massages for four months prior to giving birth to her daughter Sydney last November. Her experience with prenatal massage was extremely gratifying, she says. "I would highly recommend prenatal massage as a way to deeply relax and to feel a connection with your baby that goes beyond the usual," said Heather. "It allows you the special time to take in a deeper sense of self, therefore relieving stress, lightening emotional strains, and relieving some physical discomforts."

During her third trimester, the massages enabled Heather to be more calm and comforted about the anticipated delivery of her first child. "I am truly grateful for the healing and caring hands of my prenatal massage therapist," says Heather. "It made a difference in my overall comfort throughout my pregnancy, and in my ability to feel in touch with my baby."

Thank you to Karen Axelrod, NCTMB, CST. She is certified by the National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage & Bodywork and is Upledger-certified in CranioSacral. Karen can be reached at 310.376.0113