

Touch Benefits During Pregnancy, Birth, and Postpartum



“There is hardly a people, ancient or modern, that do not in some way resort to massage and expression in labor, even if it be a natural and easy one.”

George Engelmann, 1884

INTRODUCTION

When I first became a massage therapist in the early 1990's and began to offer Pregnancy massage, I was a labor and delivery nurse. Few people offered prenatal massage, and it was still considered by some as possibly 'dangerous'. I informed the obstetrical doctors at my workplace about my new massage practice and asked for referrals. Many doctors had never had a massage before, and when I mentioned it with regards to their pregnant clients, they looked at me blankly or with uncertainty, responding with comments like:

"Why?... How could massage help?"

"They're pregnant, what do you expect? Of course they are uncomfortable."

"There is nothing you can do about back pain, that's just part of being pregnant. It goes away after they deliver."

Despite some resistance, the ones who did send their clients to me were delighted to find that some of their worst complainers were now pain-free and much happier about their growing bodies. Since that time, pregnancy massage has become much more commonplace thankfully. But while more hospitals are attempting to become supportive of birthing women's needs -- including using traditional practices such as water, squatting ropes and bars, and darkened rooms,-- many doctors still remain unaware of the benefits of massage that help to offset complaints during pregnancy, labor, and the postpartum period.

My goal is to share about the benefits of touch during the perinatal period, and encourage more partners, friends, doulas, midwives, nurses and doctors to utilize this tool. It is always available and very often effective at soothing anxiety, decreasing discomfort, speeding labor, reducing medical interventions, and improving recovery after birth.

Thanks for reading!

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Touch for Birth offers services in: Maine, Oregon, California, Hawaii.

THE POWER OF TOUCH

The Birth of Our First Sense

Have you heard people talk about how irritating people get “under my skin”, or how they feel “touched” by a moving ceremony, or that we need to use some “tact” when we address certain sensitive subjects? The significance of touch in human lives is demonstrated in part by its basic integration into our speech. Touch is a form of communication, a language that has the potential to support and nourish, as well as hurt.

Most mothers and children know instinctively that touch is essential and critical to the making of physically and emotionally healthy living things. The in-utero infant has constant tactile contact in the womb. Rocked in amniotic fluid, the baby in-utero is stimulated and massaged by the sound wave vibrations of a mother’s voice, her heartbeat, respirations, her intestinal activity, and the contractions of her uterus. If a mother massages her belly, the baby feels that touch indirectly as well. When a newborn emerges from this tactile sensory world into the external world, she will die if she or he receives no touch at all.



This is no surprise, considering that the skin is our largest sense organ, comprising 18% of our body, (Field, T 2001:77) and emerging before the eyes and ears during fetal development. Touch is considered by many to be the “mother of all senses.” The skin arises from the *ectoderm*—the outer cellular layer of an embryo, which also develops into the other sense organs and nervous system, as well as into teeth and hair. The skin plays an essential role in stimulating the brain --- it is

through the skin--- through touch stimulation as well as through movement, that most stimuli are sent to the brain.

Despite the importance of touch, the U.S.A. falls far behind other cultures in initiating touch contact with their infants. In the United States, infants are typically held between 2-3 hours per day. Compare this to the Kalahari San who, at least at one time, held their infants 90% of each day. Not surprisingly, infants that are touched and carried throughout the day cry significantly less than those who are carried infrequently (Field, T 2001:51).

References to touch are subconsciously embedded in our language because it is a vital part of our existence and critical to any mammal’s healthy survival. This truth has finally been acknowledged after 40 years of research, (unfortunately at the expense of many creatures who suffered to prove the point). Let’s look at the results of some of these studies.

Touch is Imperative for our Health

There are quite a few studies that demonstrate how vital touch is for our survival. Perhaps many of us have seen the photographs or read about the studies by Harry and Margaret Harlow who, in the 1950's and 1960's, took baby monkeys away from their mothers and raised them alone in cages to study the psychology of isolation. These young monkeys clung desperately to a rag in their cage--their only form of solace.



After months of isolation, these babies were introduced to other monkeys, and were found to have no social skills. In almost all respects they were dysfunctional beings. They were prone to violent outbursts and resembled autistic humans in the ways they held and rocked themselves alone.

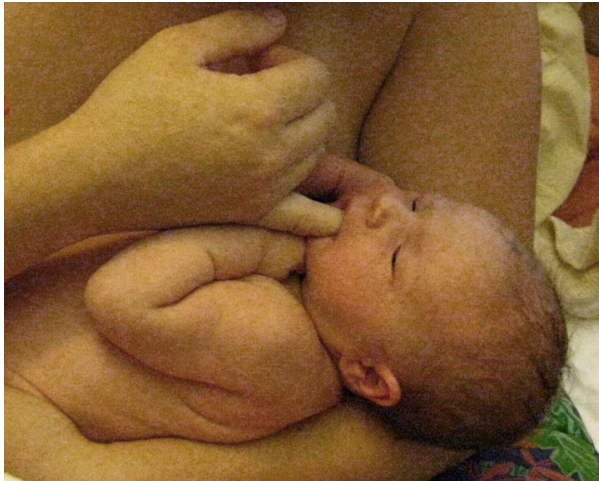
It is no surprise to learn that neglected or isolated infant humans respond similarly in what has been termed, "anaclitic depression" (Johnson&Johnson 1995:6). Studies with monkeys and with humans have shown that the need for touch overrides other basic and significant infant needs, including such essentials as food, rocking, and sight, smell, or sound of a mother. Without critical bonding through touch, an infant will not explore its environment nor develop normally.

Human adults or adolescents who have been deprived of touch in their infancy show tendencies toward aggression, impaired social skills, abnormal sexual behavior, and are at high risk for abusing their own offspring (Johnson & Johnson 1995:7-9).

In the 1980's, a comparison of 49 different cultures was done which indicated that societies with a high level of physical affection in infancy, have the lowest levels of social violence (Gambill). Perhaps part of the reason for this is that touch increases our 'feel good' hormones. Blood tests taken after research participants received massage indicated increased serotonin levels. Depression, aggression, and self-destructive actions are all associated with low serotonin levels.

Similar to the story of Harlow's findings with isolated monkeys, was a discovery made in the late 1800's and early 1900's about orphaned infants who were being treated with the best care known at that time. This meant they were isolated in individual cribs, fed only at feeding time, left alone most of the time, and only handled for the essentials of cleaning and feeding. Despite following these new state-of-the-art guidelines, staff found the mortality rate of these infants ranged from 50-**100%** !! (Spitz). No one understood why, but they did notice that in one orphanage, some infants were surviving.

The only difference found was that one of the workers was holding the babies regularly. Following this cue, they instituted more infant touch into the care regimen and voila!.. the survival rates soared!



TOUCH: Increases hormones that make us happier, healthier, and higher functioning.

TOUCH: Is even more important than food for infant survival.

TOUCH: Helps infants adapt socially.

TOUCH: Reduces aggressive tendencies.

TOUCH: Increases infant brain development.

Touch Improves Mothering Abilities

In a study in the 1960's, researchers put restrictive collars on pregnant rats to stop them from licking themselves. These rats ended up having 50% less developed mammary glands, were terrible nest-building and had poor mothering skills, even after the collars were removed. Of course, it is not hard to imagine that pregnant women would become dysfunctional as well if they were collared and restrained from bathing or caring for themselves until the birth of their baby (Roth, Rosenblatt: 1967, 1968, 1966)! However, the study may be important in demonstrating how nurturing touch can influence our hormones, sociability, and adaptation to our life as humans.

TOUCH: Receiving touch themselves, helps mother's to touch their infants more easily and frequently.



Physiological Affects of Touch

Touch affects our physiology on a profound level. Ashley Montagu claims that individuals who have been “unloved during childhood” have less bone growth which is visible in x-rays of the leg bones. I haven’t examined these studies, but Montagu also claimed that these lines of growth retardation are visible in the hand bones of infants born to women who had especially emotionally difficult times during pregnancy (Montagu). More research is needed to support these claims, but an interesting thought at any rate.

On a subtler level, immune system responses and production of growth hormone are both stimulated by nurturing touch. The improvement of immune systems was demonstrated in a study of HIV-positive men who received 45-minute massages five times a week for a month. The number and activity of beneficial cells that fought against the virus increased significantly, while levels of detrimental stress hormones decreased (Field 2001:69).

Rat infants handled regularly in the first 6 months of life are found to gain weight faster than those not touched at all. They too have a more optimally functioning immune system with higher antibody levels. They develop faster in general, and have heavier brains (Roth, Rosenblatt: 1967, 1968, 1966) .



TOUCH: Increases functioning of immune system.

TOUCH: May affect bone development.

TOUCH: Influences our hormones.

TOUCH DURING PREGNANCY

Research helps us understand the importance of touch, the depth to which it affects our well-being, and especially why it is so critical during pregnancy. Some benefits of massage include improvement in the pituitary gland's mobilization of prolactin-the milk-producing hormone. It also influences the hormones estrogen and progesterone, which are involved in breast development, and which enhance the critical function of the placenta, help the body stay pregnant and prepare a woman's body for birth and mothering.

Tiffany Field, PhD, a leading researcher at the Touch Research Institute in Miami, has conducted numerous studies about the benefits of touch during the perinatal cycle. These studies show that women who receive nurturing touch during pregnancy and birth touch their newborn children with more confidence, more consistently, and more frequently. One of Field's studies found that women who received a 20-minute back massage, five times a week during their pregnancy had less anxiety, fewer stress hormones, and experienced deeper sleep, improved moods, and less back and leg pain. Overall their pregnancies were healthier, and they had a decreased rate of premature delivery and obstetrical complications (Field, T et al 1998).

Field's studies have also found that postpartum women who are able to hold and touch their infants uninterrupted for at least two hours after birth, offer more curious and affectionate touch for several hours and days later, than do women who are not able to bond for this period.

As for the infants, those who are touched affectionately for this time period immediately after birth, rather than taken away for testing and hospital routines, are more alert, nurse better, and adapt more easily to life outside the womb (Prodromidis M., Field T, Et al. 1995).



TOUCH: Enhances the endocrine system and release of critical hormones necessary for healthy optimal pregnancies.

TOUCH: Reduces pain and anxiety, improves moods and sleep ability.

TOUCH: Increases the amount women touch their infants.

Touch and Stress

Perhaps we can learn from those who do not shy away from touch at all; gorillas groom each other for up to eight hours each day; dolphins are constantly sliding up against one another and initiating body contact; cats and dogs make every effort to get their humans to touch them regularly. Humans are no different. We are made for touching and need it to help reduce stress.

Undeniably, in industrialized and technological cultures, people have highly stressful lifestyles. This is what we know about chronic stress... It:

decreases the efficiency of the immune system

alters the regulation of blood sugar levels

causes gastric ulcers, hypertension, heart attacks, insomnia, depression, pain, and increased blood cholesterol.

AND a **very Important note is:** when a pregnant woman lives with chronic stress, her baby, in-utero is also affected. It is now quite clear that the likelihood that an infant will develop an issue like autism or Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) is magnified when his mother suffered from chronic or severe stress during her pregnancy(Linnet, et al).

The key to relieving stress is in part to not *create* it, but more realistically, to minimize it by learning how to make ease, fun and relaxation a part of our daily lives.

Relaxation is associated with a decrease in all the above pathological symptoms.

The DVD, *Mastering Pregnancy Massage*, available at TouchForBirth.com , has 3 hours of specific instruction in massage support during pregnancy.



Massage, acupressure, breathing, visualization, meditation and exercise are all well-documented modes of relaxation and stress reduction that can be extremely useful during pregnancy, birth, and in the postpartum period.

THE BENEFITS OF TOUCH DURING PREGNANCY

INCREASED CONNECTION: Nurturing touch enhances a pregnant mother's awareness of her body and helps her develop her skills for relaxing while connecting to her baby. This helps her deal with the sensations of labor, and enjoy her birth and postpartum experiences more readily. If she can associate touch with relaxation *before* birth begins, then *during* birth, her body will automatically remember that relaxation cue when she is touched.

INCREASED ENERGY: Nurturing touch relieves fatigue, stress, sleeplessness, and encourages the release of *serotonin*, a hormone that helps us 'feel good'. Touch stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system, helping a woman relax and simultaneously increase alertness.

MUSKULOSKELTAL EASE: Massage can reduce stress on joints and muscles and improve their function, making pregnancy more comfortable. Increased blood circulation through the groin area helps reduce varicose veins, swelling, muscle spasms and numbness of the feet.

IMPROVED PHYSIOLOGY: Massage can increase a woman's venous blood return to the heart, and stimulate lymphatic flow which means waste products from cellular functioning are removed from the body. This helps decrease edema, reduce blood pressure, and relieve headaches. Baby gets more oxygen when Mom relaxes and breathes deeply with massage as well.

ENHANCED PLACENTAL FUNCTION: Massage improves the function of the placenta that's keeping baby healthy, and improves hormonal prolactin production, which not only stimulates milk production, but also influences a woman's "nesting instincts" and her ability to nurture her infant.

INCREASED IMMUNITY: As a woman's stress decreases by receiving nurturing massage support, the functioning of her immune system is also enhanced.

PERINEAL EASE: Massage of the pelvic floor before and during labor can help facilitate more stretching of these delicate tissues during birth. Becoming familiar with stretching sensations in that area can help reduce her fear during the birth of her infant, thereby reducing the risk of episiotomy-or medical cutting of the tissues.

INCREASED NURTURANCE: Mothers who receive nurturing touch during pregnancy and birth have been shown to touch their newborns more frequently and with more confidence. Babies who are touched regularly socialize more readily, grow faster, are more coordinated, and have stronger immune systems.

INCREASED WORLD PEACE: As a mother receives nurturing touch, she learns to touch her infant in the same way, enabling the infant to grow and develop in a healthy positive environment. Infants that are not touched become aggressive and withdrawn, with more tendencies toward violence.

TOUCH DURING BIRTH

As we've read above, there are many benefits of touch during *pregnancy*. There are even more good reasons to use touch during birth. Learning some particularly helpful techniques is helpful, such as acupressure points for reducing pain or speeding labor, ways of applying pressure to the hips and sacrum to reduce back pain, belly rub techniques for increasing or soothing contractions, or strokes for the head and neck that can help reduce anxiety and help dilate the cervix.

You can learn more about these vital nurturing touch tools in the DVD: **MotherTouch: Touch Techniques for Birth** or in the book, *Nurturing Massage for Pregnancy*, both found at <http://www.TouchForBirth.com>.

Not every woman will desire or tolerate touch during labor. For some, their focus is totally inward and any outside influence, including touch, can be distracting or disturbing. For those who do appreciate touch during part of all of their birth, however, the benefits are important and discussed below.

Support for Healthy Birthing

Paramount for most women to having a satisfying birth experience is having the support of a massage therapist or **doula**--a caregiver who specializes in offering emotional encouragement and physical touch during birth. This can be a professional, a friend or relative or partner who is experienced with birth and knows a variety of ways of supporting the laboring woman in any situation. Touch has been repeatedly demonstrated to help a mother have a safer, more relaxing birth.

If women feel unsafe in their environment, or feel no solid emotional support during birth, their fear and stress increase. Remember the last time you were scared or stressed? Typically your breath becomes shallow and fast, your muscles get tense, your face may get red as your veins constrict. Stress causes the release of hormones called ***catecholamines*** -- such as adrenaline--which cause these body responses. Catecholamines also cause smooth muscles to stop their work. This means when a woman is stressed, her uterus—which is smooth muscle-- may stop contracting, resulting in slowed or stalled labor.... not what one needs for birthing their baby! (It is always a good idea to assess a mother's stress levels if her labor slows down, and offer a variety of comfort measures before deciding to use pitocin.)

One way to create a safe birthing environment and reduce a mother's stress is to have a support team or individual with her during birth. Over the past two decades, studies representing over 12,700 women have proven that positive support and nurturing touch during birth ends up leading to a more personally satisfying birth experience for women. It also clearly decreases the amount of medical interventions in hospitals, and speeds labor significantly (Hodnett, Gates, et al; Kennel, Klaus, Mcgrath et al 1991;Rosen).

Benefits of Touch During Labor

So, having a supportive person present during birth definitively helps ease labor, but by adding the element of *touch*, the body's natural ability to relax and birth well is increased dramatically.

Touch has been shown to stimulate the production of the hormone *oxytocin*--a necessary hormone for stimulating contractions. Oxytocin research indicates that the hormone also reduces anxiety, helps women tolerate pain better, increases their ability to be social and connect emotionally (Lund; Uvnas-Moberg).

Women who participated in studies in Turkey, Taiwan, England, and the United States are evidence of this. They received massage or acupressure during labor and described their experience of labor pain as significantly less than those who received none. Those who received touch every day for 2 weeks before labor and also *during* labor, reported that the same level of painful stimulation felt **less** painful to them **after** massage than it did before the massage, even though their stress hormone cortisol levels were the same in both those who received the touch as in those who did not (Lund; Nabb).



TOUCH: Offers support during labor, decreasing stress hormones that stall labor.

TOUCH: Increases pain thresholds, helping women tolerate the sensations of labor better.

BENEFITS OF TOUCH DURING LABOR

SPEEDS LABOR: Nurturing touch speeds labor and decreases the need for synthetic hormones for induction-- Pitocin (Hodnett; Scott; Field 1997). Abdominal massage may help increase the strength and/or frequency of contractions.

IMPROVED PHYSIOLOGICAL FUNCTIONING: Nurturing touch and emotional support increases oxytocin levels. Oxytocin in the bloodstream not only causes contractions, but also helps decrease anxiety, blood pressure, and cortisol levels, and can have a sedative effect, helping women manage contractions more easily (Lund).

RELIEVES MUSCULAR DISCOMFORT: Massage reduces muscular aching and cramps. During labor this is especially helpful for back pain and cramping.

DECREASES USE OF PAIN MEDICATIONS: Touch can decrease a woman's sense of pain and make her pain threshold higher, so that she uses less pain medication (Hodnett;Lund;Yildirim; Uvnas; Chang).

DECREASES BACK LABOR PAIN: Touch techniques to the low back can relieve "back labor" and general low back pain (Lund).

INCREASES CERVICAL DILATION: Midwives and massage therapists find that massage to the jaw, or the "upper mouth" can sometimes help relax the "lower mouth," or the vagina and cervix, promoting dilation and birth.

HELPS BABY REPOSITION APPROPRIATELY: Belly rubs can be helpful for encouraging babies to reposition in the belly when necessary, allowing for easier birth.

RENEWS ENERGY: During a long labor, the use of invigorating strokes or acupressure can help increase energy.

INCREASES SATISFACTION WITH BIRTH EXPERIENCE: Quality emotional support, as well as nurturing touch, improves a woman's ability to cope with contractions and increases her level of satisfaction with her birth (Hodnett;Leeman)

SUPPORT TOOLS FOR BIRTH COMPANIONS: Offering massage and touch gives the labor support team specific ways to feel useful and help a woman feel good.

DECREASES ANXIETY: Touch provides emotional support and reassurance. It decreases anxiety and fear, and helps a woman relax with increased confidence in herself and her process. This improves the progression of birth (Scott; Nabb; Sommer; Klaus, Kennel 1993).

REDUCES MEDICAL INTERVENTIONS: Continuous emotional and touch support during labor reduces medical interventions such as cesarean birth, forceps and the use of inducing hormone to start labor--pitocin (Hodnett; Scott).

REDUCES DEPRESSION: Touch during birth has been shown to decrease the incidence of postpartum depression (Scott, Field 1997).

INCREASES MATERNAL ATTENTION TOWARD INFANT: Studies have shown that women who receive loving support and nurturing touch during labor, end up touching and interacting with their infants more than those who do not receive that support (Klaus, Kennel 1993; Homeyer; Wolman).

Remembering Touch Amidst Technology

Many medical procedures have replaced traditional, time-honored massage and natural healing techniques throughout pregnancy and birth. Following are a few descriptions of these changes and reminders of touch techniques that may still be useful.

Episiotomy

Episiotomy is the cutting of the pelvic floor tissue in order to speed delivery of a baby. At one time this was a very common hospital practice. The 1987 Merck Manual, a reference manual of medical conditions and treatments, encouraged episiotomy for all first time mothers, and recommended it for subsequent deliveries if the woman had never had a delivery without episiotomy—in other words, all women delivering were eventually to be cut according to this medical point of view. The 2000 edition finally changed this information, stating that it should be done “only if the perineum does not stretch adequately and is obstructing delivery. Episiotomy is usually necessary only for first deliveries at term.” Thank goodness they figured that out!

Many women request not to be cut, and practice perineal massage for 6 weeks before delivery to help the tissues be more supple and able to stretch during birth. Practicing pelvic floor massage can empower women to become more familiar with this area of their body. Moist warm packs during birth is also a useful tool for making the tissues supple for delivery, as well as in aiding recovery after birth.

While some women do tear at delivery, these tears tend to heal more easily than do the episiotomies, which leave weaker tissues vulnerable to tearing more deeply in future births. For detailed information about performing perineal massage, sign up for my blog: BirthMassage.blogspot.com. I will announce the publishing of a report on a few specific pelvic floor massage techniques. If you already have pain and problems related to previous births, sexual abuse, or other reasons, find a skilled physical therapist, bodyworker, midwife, or nurse who can help alleviate some of the physical and emotional pain. As a nurse, I offer bodywork sessions for women with pelvic floor complaints and find that many longstanding discomforts can be mediated with some simple physical and emotional techniques.

Manual Version of Breech Baby

For babies in the breech position in Mom’s belly—with their buttocks or feet down in mom’s belly instead of the head—a doctor may attempt a *manual version*, or rotation of the baby by very intense manipulations mother’s belly. This can be very painful for the mother, uncomfortable for the baby in-utero, and potentially dangerous for both. If the rotation of the baby is not successful, most doctors will perform a cesarean section.

Most midwives around the world however, have techniques for moving babies. Most typically, traditional midwives massage women’s abdomens beginning in early pregnancy to ensure that the baby situates itself in a head-down position from the start. If there *is* a breech positioning, most midwives are skilled and comfortable in delivering that way as well. Sometimes cesarean is necessary, but supporting traditional midwifery

knowledge of abdominal-uterine massage throughout pregnancy is one way we can prevent unnecessary surgeries for breech babies.

There are other tools and methods that can be helpful and which should be tried before resorting to surgery (unless it is an emergency of course!). For instance, Bladder 67 is a well-documented acupuncture point on the outer edge of the little toe that is often used successfully with acupuncture needling and other methods. These might include burning moxa on the point (an acupuncture technique), having a woman lie on a slant board upside down, massaging the baby through the abdomen, and using hot and cold packs on the abdomen to encourage baby to move to the head down position.

Pain Medications and Epidurals

Intravenous, injection and oral pain medications have replaced much of the touch and massage that was once used to ease labor pain worldwide. While medications can help reduce pain sensations, they also cross through the placenta into baby's circulation, causing some newborns to require oxygen or resuscitation at birth because their lungs and circulatory system are depressed by the medications. What a way to enter the world... drugged! It can take hours for baby to fully recover and be able to nurse well.

Epidurals are now commonly used for pain control. Tiny catheters are placed in the epidural space of the spinal column and medication is given through the catheter to numb sensations from the waist down. Women are excited to imagine a painless birth, however, epidurals are not without significant risks to the mom and to her baby. Nicking or puncturing the spinal column causes intense "spinal" headache, as well as risks of infection. Sometimes respiratory paralysis or even heart attack can be caused. C-section rates increase dramatically with epidurals because of stalled labors, a woman's inability to push effectively, mal-positioning of the baby, or sudden drops in a mother's blood pressure or babies heart rate related to receiving the epidural.

A true emergency necessitates an epidural or cesarean section, but as a labor and delivery nurse, I can attest that many interventions are implemented after epidurals are placed that could have been avoided if women had had adequate support and nurturing presence and touch during birth.

There are no known risks associated with receiving massage during labor and postpartum, and its beneficial effects are well-documented.



Induction of labor

In hospitals, when labor is slow or contractions don't seem to be strong enough to effect change, a synthetic hormone, called *pitocin*, is used to start or strengthen uterine contractions. Pitocin is used when a pregnant woman is considered "overdue" or if there are other problems making prompt delivery a good idea. There are many less harsh and less intrusive methods that could be attempted first. Pitocin is nothing more than a synthetic version of oxytocin, the body's natural contraction hormone, but its use requires the woman to be strapped to a machine for constant monitoring of her contractions and baby's heart rate. It is stressful and painful for baby and mother with contractions that are often much sharper and more intense than normal. This leads to an increase in the use of pain medication and epidurals, which can lead to a consequent increase in problems with baby.

In traditional births, there are many methods and types of touch that can be tried successfully to the same end. Castor oil belly rubs and abdominal packs, oral castor oil, aromatherapy, acupressure and acupuncture, massage herbal teas and tinctures, visualizations, sexual intercourse and sexual activities, walking and exercise, creating a safe and nurturing space in which to birth a baby, and patience, all are wisdom methods of helping labor along.

If baby and mother are both healthy, try any labor supportive techniques described in my book: **Nurturing Massage for Pregnancy** or on the DVD **Touch Techniques for Birth** found at <http://www.TouchForBirth.com>.

These techniques, including the use of visualization and energy work, can effectively help labor get underway, or may be used in conjunction with pitocin to help ease some discomfort.



As long as baby and mother are healthy, use acupuncture/acupressure to balance the body hormones, massage to encourage relaxation, and other methods to support contractions, until labor begins-(as it always does eventually!) allowing for an easier un-medicated birth!

TOUCH DURING THE POSTPARTUM PERIOD

The benefits of touch do not stop once the baby is born! Obviously, touch for baby is vital. But often the mother is forgotten in the excitement of tending to the new family member. More than ever before though, a new mother now needs real recovery support through skilled nurturing touch.

Postpartum massage focuses on helping a new mother **Regenerate, Renew, and Release**. Whether or not she feels a need for special care, her body is making fast changes.

In order to bring forth new life, a mother has opened both energetically and physically. To function well in the world after pregnancy, her ligaments must tighten again, her pelvic bones close and realign, and her core support structure--the spine and supporting muscles, the pelvic floor, and the abdomen--must be strengthened. She must tend to her postural alignment as she adjusts to a non-pregnant shape and weight. Her internal organs--bladder and womb--need support through muscular toning of the pelvic floor and abdominals, as well as uterine massage.

Many discomforts of new motherhood can be mediated with massage. Touch helps increase the release of endorphins, rebalance hormones, increase blood flow, and reduce stress, anxiety, and mild postpartum depression.



Massage can be a reminder to a woman that she needs nurturing as much as her baby does. Meaningful nurturing touch will help her to transfer that nurturance to her own child.

Benefits for Baby & Mother

Postpartum massage benefits not only a mother, but her baby as well. Women who are massaged during pregnancy or labor touch their babies more often. Babies respond to this touch with faster brain development, greater social skills, stronger immune systems, and increased weight gain.

One study asked new mothers during the first day after birth to touch their babies with skin-to-skin contact for 1 hour longer than they would have done normally and to add an extra 5 hours of touching over the next 3 days. When these mothers were observed 1 month later, they were found making much more frequent nurturing contact with their infants than mothers who only gave the routine contact. The researchers returned 5 years later to test the children. Guess what!?! Those children who had received the extra

touch were uniformly found to have higher IQ and language test scores than the children who did not have the extra touch.

Benefits of Postpartum Massage

REDUCES MUSCLE ACHES: Many of the aches of lifting, nursing, and carrying baby around can be relieved with massage.

IMPROVES POSTURE: Touch helps a mother's body return to the physiology and posture she had before pregnancy, including realignment of the pelvis.

EMOTIONAL SUPPORT: Touch can be a source of emotional and physical support during a stressful time. Massage reduces a woman's risk for postpartum depression (Field 2005; Field 1996) and encourages a mother to practice self-care in a time when most attention is focused on the baby.

HASTENS RECOVERY: Touch offers nurturance for cesarean section recover and decreases the formation of adhesions that occur after any surgery and which can cause pain and dysfunction in the abdomen. Uterine massage helps decrease risk of excessive postpartum uterine bleeding and uterine or bladder prolapse.

BENEFITS BREASTFEEDING: Breast massage may increase lipids, solids and casein in breast milk (Foda; Hongo) and improves a mother's experience of her changing breast sensations. It also decreases her risk of clogged ducts and mastitis (Wilson-Clay; La Leche League)

BENEFITS DIGESTION: Abdominal massage can help improve constipation (Ernst; Ayas)

BENEFITS BABY: Nurturing touch for mom leads her to touch her infant with more awareness and confidence. The mother and family can be taught infant massage skills, to enhance and increase meaningful contact between baby and family.

REDUCES PERINEAL DISCOMFORT: Pelvic floor massage after birth can help reduce scarring, adhesions, and nerve discomfort related to perineal tears, episiotomies, and the general stretching that occurs during vaginal birth.

REDUCES INCIDENCE OF UTERINE PROLAPSE: Sometimes the uterus or bladder can sag down in the pelvis and literally fall out through the vagina. External uterine massage can help maintain proper positioning of the uterus in the pelvis and reduce the level of prolapse that may occur in postpartum.

Postpartum Concerns Addressed by Touch and Massage

Three conditions related to giving birth that plague many post-birthing women may be benefited by specific massage techniques. These conditions include pelvic floor pain and dysfunction, breast discomforts and ailments related to breastfeeding and milk production, and the prolapse of the uterus.

Pelvic Floor Discomfort

During birth, women may experience tears in the perineal floor due to the size of the baby relative to the mother's tissues ability to stretch, or due to the method with which the baby was born. Some doctors may perform an episiotomy or cutting of the pelvic floor when they feel that would be more appropriate than tearing. Large tears or cutting necessitates stitching repair afterward. This can leave many women with permanent discomfort in the perineal area, including nerve pain, scar tissue, and adhesions that pull on the pelvis creating hip imbalances, sciatica, and sexual dysfunction.

Pelvic floor massage, performed by physical therapists, osteopaths, skilled nurses or midwives can help to reduce the scarring, tension, and improper firing of nerve impulses in the area.

Breast Massage

Breast feeding women experience changes in the size, texture, and sensations of the breasts. As the ducts and lobules in the breast fill with milk, women often experience pain, swelling, and general discomfort. Feeding the baby and emptying the breasts will help relieve discomfort. Gentle massage, moving in a circular motion toward the nipples can also help to relieve tension in the breast tissue, and prevent clogged ducts that lead to infections in the breast known as *mastitis*.

Breast massage can also help a woman feel more comfortable with the size and sensations in her breasts, and improve her ability to relax and allow the milk to 'let down' so baby receives a healthy flow of milk while nursing.

[Nurturing Massage for Pregnancy](#) offers some specific breast massage techniques to address these very issues. Watch [BirthMassage.blogspot.com](#) and [TouchForBirth.com](#) to see when a new DVD demonstrating touch techniques for the postpartum period is released.

Uterine Prolapse/Uterine Massage

Many women experience prolapse of a pelvic organ (usually uterus or bladder) through the vagina. One of ten women seek treatment resulting in surgery to correct this prolapse (Olson et al). This occurrence happens more frequently to women who have had multiple pregnancies.

When the pelvic floor muscles become flaccid the pelvic organs begin to move downward and can actually fall out of the vagina, literally hanging between a woman's legs. While not usually exceptionally painful, it is exceedingly stressful and uncomfortable. The medical treatment for this is either surgery or use of a pessary—a donut-shaped rubber piece that fits inside the vagina to support the uterus. Specific abdominal massage that addresses the uterus can help in some instances as well.

The traditional method for dealing with prolapse is prevention. Mayan women, and perhaps all women, were taught from a young age to massage the uterus through the belly after a woman falls, experiences lurching rides, or after birth and anytime there is risk of the uterus being malpositioned. In addition, pelvic floor exercises should be learned as children and practiced throughout life, just as many learn to brush teeth regularly. This will help prevent this epidemic.

Some practitioners, myself included, offer abdominal massage specifically intended to help pelvic circulation and uterine repositioning. These techniques can also help with fertility issues.

Support throughout the Childbearing Cycle

There are so many benefits to touch during Pregnancy, Birth and New Motherhood!

In closing, consider the following:

Trust the Body: Through touch, partners and therapists can support and affirm the powerful energies germinating and growing within each pregnant mother. Mothers know how to grow and birth a baby when given the chance to listen to her own rhythm.

Touch is Easy: Specific tools and techniques are helpful to have in your toolbag of ideas for supporting women during the childbearing year. In the end though, the most important of tools are allowing emotional and psychic support to flow through the hands, while listening to how a woman's body responds. Help her to relax into the assurance that she is being well-tended by her companions.

Create sanctuary: Create sanctuaries for pregnant women and new mothers to retreat away from the outside world. This can help alleviate some stresses associated with pregnancy and postpartum. Reducing stress and offering nurturing touch can help pregnancy, birth, and new motherhood be even more of an exciting and empowering experience for women and families and their communities.

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