

**MOTHERTOUCH™**

**ABDOMINAL MASSAGE  
DURING PREGNANCY**



**Online Class**

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This text is adapted from Chapter 5 pgs 102-108 in my textbook: Nurturing Massage for Pregnancy. You may read the book instead, but please scan this pdf for special information.

Orange text indicates updated information since the book was written.

Green indicates that detailed information can be found in other Online Courses.

Yellow or **Bold text** highlights emphasized information.

**Red indicates cautionary information.**

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## Abdominal Massage During Pregnancy



Belly massage offers time for both client and therapist to connect with Baby. Abdominal massage can be wonderfully relaxing and nurturing and help a mother feel more united in her body, as both the belly and back can be massaged simultaneously. Both sidelying and semi-reclining positioning are excellent for giving and receiving belly rubs.

### **Benefits of Prenatal Abdominal Massage**

1. **ATTUNEMENT:** When massaging pregnant clients, you are massaging TWO people at once (or more if she has multiples!) Baby is influenced by your touch, feels the massage, and experiences changes in the intrauterine environment as the mother relaxes deeply during a massage. Belly massage allows the therapist and mother time during a session to acknowledge the baby's presence and experience.
2. **PAIN RELIEF:** Belly Massage techniques can relieve uterine round ligament pain, hip pain, pubic bone and groin pain that may develop as a pregnancy progresses.
3. **UNITY:** Rather than avoiding her belly, I incorporate touch to her sides and belly while working on her back to help create a sense of unity in the body. There is a lot going on in that growing belly...why should we avoid it?! No reason at all.. unless she doesn't want you to touch it!
4. **RELAXING or EMOTIONAL RELEASE:** In the first trimester, gentle massage on the belly, or at least holding the belly and lumbar region simultaneously can be relaxing and reassuring for a new mother. It gives her a space and time that she may not be taking otherwise, to attune to the growing life within. She may feel emotions arise if she has had prior miscarriages or has specific fears. If you are comfortable with that, this may be a good time for her to express them gently.

5. **BIRTH PREP:** Certain strokes support birth preparation, relaxing the ligaments, creating space for the baby to move into an optimal pelvic-oriented position, and sometimes stimulating contractions (after 38 weeks).

6. **YUMMY!:** It usually Feels Good—to Mother, Baby, and Practitioner!

***Take Note of the following basic conventions regarding belly rubs during pregnancy:***

- **REVERENCE & RESPECTD:** Treat the belly as if you are approaching sacred ground—with respect and care. Always ask permission before touching the abdomen. This may be more appropriate to discuss before your client gets on your table—Tell her what you might offer her, including belly massage, and ensure that she is comfortable with that. After permission is obtained, slowly and gently place the palms on the belly.

- **BABY GREETING:** Lay your hands on her belly and say hello to baby before you begin to stroke. Remember, you are massaging two people!

- **FIRM PRESSURE** (but not Hard!): In general, pressure should be firm, with a solid palmar touch, rather than feather-light. Very light touch is irritating to most women. Ask for feedback about the pressure. Most practitioners are fearful of pressing too hard, consequently work much too lightly to be satisfying to the mother.

### **BELLY MASSAGE PRECAUTIONS**

#### ***Deep Abdominal Massage***

Generally speaking, No deep abdominal work at any time of pregnancy is appropriate. This basically means---don't try to work on the psoas directly through the abdomen. It also means, don't do such firm pressure that you overstimulate the uterus and cause pain or discomfort for the mother or baby! (obviously) However, as noted later in this text, there are some times when deeper contact in the belly might be advisable, by a trained practitioner.

#### ***Limit your belly time***

Usually I do belly rubs for 5-10 minutes, unless intentionally attempting to encourage labor, or working on a specific issue around the abdomen. This is to avoid overstimulation of the uterus which may become slightly and temporarily contractile.

### ***Client Refusal***

Abdominal massage is always contraindicated if the mother refuses it! Some women may enjoy general massage, but not be secure enough with their practitioner to accept touch to the belly when pregnant. Some find the belly so extra sensitive that they don't want anyone to touch it. Others say it's a private zone and they don't want intrusion. Some feel ashamed of their stretch marks and don't want attention there. For any reason that a client states, or for no reason at all, respect her wish and avoid the belly!

However, be aware that sometimes a refusal is because of ignorance, a belief that belly massage may be dangerous, or other mis-conceptions. Giving them written or verbal descriptions of the approach and the benefits may change her mind! Always inform your client why you might do belly massage, and give her a chance to say yes, once she gets used to your touch and your presence. With more confidence in how you touch them in general, she may become open to your touching her abdomen.

### ***Contractions***

The client may experience mild uterine contractions or tightening and releasing of the uterus during abdominal massage (Braxton Hicks contractions). This is normal in the late 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> trimesters and does not necessarily indicate she is going into labor! No concern is warranted for a client experiencing contractions if she is 38 weeks gestation or more. **However, if she is less than 38 weeks and not due to birth, and she feels more than 2 new contractions occur during the belly rub, stop massaging!** Five to ten minutes of gentle belly massage will not create pre-term labor contractions, but if your client is becoming aware of multiple contractions, then it may be too stimulating!

### ***Health Intake***

Always do a health intake before each prenatal massage, with specific questions that will let you know whether belly massage will be appropriate or not. Conditions change day by day during pregnancy. Ensure she has no new health risks since last you saw her. This includes confirmation that her blood pressure is normal, that she has not had any vaginal bleeding, preterm labor, or placental issues.

### High Risk Pregnancy

Standard prenatal abdominal massage is *typically* contraindicated during a high-risk pregnancy that involves high blood pressure or preeclampsia, and with any fetal, uterine, or placental abnormalities, blood clotting disorders, or any concerns about preterm labor. High blood pressure can lead to a higher risk of the placenta dislodging from the lining of the uterus (*placental abruption*).

Gentle massage, such as described in this text, will not cause an abruption, but of course if you are aware that she is at risk for that, you certainly don't want to be associated with it should it occur sometime after a massage. Uterine contractions and braxton-hicks "practice" contractions, can be stimulated by massaging too briskly, for too long, or with too much pressure on an already irritable uterus. This is obviously contraindicated in situations where you do not want contractions to be promoted!

That could be a blanket contraindication—"No abdominal massage during high-risk pregnancy."

However, I *also believe* that a gentle, nurturing, holding, and non-stimulating 'mother-touch' on the belly can be comforting, relieving, and reassuring during high-risk pregnancies. Being told you have a high risk pregnancy is stressful! Stress can lead to other pregnancy problems! SO, if my client wants belly touch during a high-risk pregnancy and I understand her risk condition, I have confidence that my use of very slow gentle strokes or no movement at all on the belly--perhaps a Reiki style touch, anything non-stimulating to the uterus and baby, but instead sedating—will not cause a problem. Used along with positive visualizations, this confident, caring, touch to the abdomen can be supportive, calming, and very beneficial to her emotional well-being. **Please note:** I don't recommend this if you are new to working with pregnant clients and lack confidence or training! Confidence is key to the transmission of reassurance to your clients!

### Deep Abdominal-Psoas Bodywork

Generally speaking, **deep** abdominal work to the psoas or internal organs is also an appropriate and common contraindication throughout pregnancy. Why disturb the 'nest' with that deep work?

However, at times deep abdominal work by skilled practitioners can be useful: for instance work on the psoas toward the end of pregnancy can release tension in the pelvic-abdominal-lumbar region enough that a breech baby may change position more easily to vertex (head down). I've seen this done in a joint effort of chiropractor and midwife. This chiropractor often works deeply through the abdomen, pushing the baby and uterus aside, to make contact with the psoas muscle.

Apart from these special situations where deeper abdominal work may be appropriate, a gentler belly massage for comfort and baby-connection **is beneficial and desirable throughout pregnancy.**

### High-Risk Conditions that Limit Prenatal Abdominal Massage

For any of these conditions you might decide to just avoid belly touch altogether; however, VERY LIGHT or STILL TOUCH can still be useful. This might mean just laying hands on the belly, or holding the belly and back simultaneously to say hello, to send good thoughts, or just making contact, listening with the hands at rest.

- ❖ Preeclampsia or HELLP Syndrome
- ❖ Preterm labor or recent history of that
- ❖ Polyhydramnios or Oligohydramnios
- ❖ High Blood Pressure (Over 140/90)
- ❖ Placental Concerns: Previa, previous abruption or risk for abruption
- ❖ Deep Vein Thrombosis
- ❖ Cervix Concerns—possibilities for pre-term delivery
- ❖ Bleeding—recent or current
  
- ❖ First trimester recent or repetitive miscarriage –get permission before doing belly massage. Gentle massage will not cause a miscarriage, but your client may not wish to do it with you.

To gain more understanding about high-risk conditions relevant to bodywork, please take Leslie's online course:

### **PRECAUTIONS & CONTRAINDICATIONS FOR BODYWORK DURING PREGNANCY**

## **CHOOSING A POSITION FOR BELLY MASSAGE**

A wonderful belly rub can be done in either sidelying or semi-reclining positions. Both have advantages and disadvantages.

### **Sidelying Belly Massage**

In general, use **sidelying positioning** when you do not want to disturb your client after a sidelying massage by repositioning to semi-reclining, or when you have a client who might feel less comfortable with face-to-face proximity during a semi-reclining belly rub.

Other clients may need limited repositioning due to hip and back complaints. Use sidelying belly rubs with someone who is much larger than you, as it is easier to access the belly and back simultaneously.

### ***Sidelying Advantages***

- *Relaxing:* If a full massage has been done in sidelying position, a belly rub in sidelying allows the woman to continue relaxing without changing position.
- *Back Access:* In sidelying, it is easier to massage both the back and belly at once, creating more unity in the client's body.

### ***Sidelying Disadvantages***

- *One-sided:* As with the rest of the massage in sidelying, you can only access one side of the body. While most of the work is done anteriorly and posteriorly with a belly rub, the lift from the side can only occur on one side at a time. Usually a belly rub in sidelying is only done from one position; the client is not asked to roll over to have the belly rub repeated on the other side.



## **Semi-Reclining Belly Massage**

Generally **semi-reclining** belly rubs are used more often during the third trimester, and are useful with clients who are generally more comfortable positioned this way, or when you or the client wants to be more engaged talking about baby or general concerns.

### ***Semi-reclining Advantages***

- **Belly Access:** In this position, you can see the belly and visualize more clearly the baby's position, body parts, and movements. You have access to the entire belly and back and the massage will feel more evenly dispersed across the belly.

- When upright in the semi-reclining position, the client may be more alert after a massage and might share more about the baby and her experiences of getting to know him or her through kicks and responses to external stimuli. The client can watch how you do the belly rub, and be more easily engaged in giving feedback about what kind of pressure or touch feels good.

- **Repositioning:** Moving out of the sidelying position will be a relief for a client who is becoming uncomfortable on her side. She may be able to breathe more deeply and therefore enjoy the belly rub more.

### ***Semi-reclining Disadvantages***

- **Physical Proximity:** In semi-reclining position, you may have closer contact with the client than she feels comfortable with. To reach the back of a woman who has a large belly or who is much larger than you, you must nearly embrace her belly. This may feel awkward or invasive for some women.

- **Repositioning:** It takes time and energy to reposition a client. If you are short on time, or don't want to disturb her, don't reposition. If the client is deep in a quiet internal space at the end of a massage in sidelying positioning, making the effort to move her body and wait for you to reposition all the pillows to semi-reclining can disturb that reflective space.

## **BELLY MASSAGE TECHNIQUES**

### ***Honor the Belly***

Place your hands gently, palm down on her belly and breathe together with her for at least 3 to 4 breaths, or until her breath relaxes and her belly softens under your touch. As she begins to trust your touch in this vulnerable area, she will relax more.

Always work slowly and with respect for emotions which are often held firmly in the belly and which sometimes come to the surface when touched in a caring way. If the client is reluctant to have touch directly on her skin, she may welcome touch through her clothes or sheet.

Below are two belly rubbing procedures, one for the sidelying position and one for the semi-reclining position.

### ***Sidelying Belly Massage***

1. *Position:* Stand at the mother's back, facing her back.

2. *Spread Oil:* After honoring the belly, as explained above, apply oil to your hands and spread the oil in a very slow, firm circle around the entire globe of your client's belly.



Figure 1

3. *Raking over the belly:* From behind client, reach over to the underside of her belly and slide up and over, making hand-over-hand raking strokes toward the superior side of her belly. (Fig 1 )

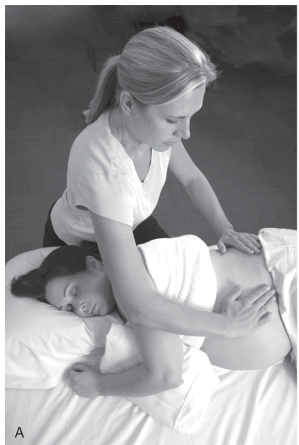


Figure 2

4. *Make lifting strokes* from the groin area toward the navel, hand-over-hand. Imagine lifting the weight of the belly and relieving pressure on the groin. (Fig 2)

5. *Mirroring*: Position yourself in a lunge position, facing the client's feet. If she is on her right side, place your right hand on her belly and your left on her back. Mirror your hand-motions as you make circles on her belly while applying strong pressure on her low back/sacrum simultaneously. (see Fig 3 A below)

6. When both the hands meet at the superior hip area, smoothly rotate on your heels to change the position of your feet so that you are facing her head and your hands so that your right hand is on her back and your left hand is on her belly. (see Fig 3 B)



(Fig 3 A)



(Fig 3 B)

### **Semi-Reclining Belly Rub**

**Note:** You may need to use a stepstool to reach adequately around the client's back from her anterior side. This position may feel too invasive to some clients.

1. Position the client semi-reclining, drape the breasts, and expose the belly in standard fashion. Proceed with honoring the belly first, as described above.

2. Warm the oil in the hands and spread it slowly in large full circles around the belly.

3. Spiral out slowly from the navel until the circling includes the waist area.



**Figure 4**

4. Make smooth raking strokes from one side to the center, reaching across the belly with hand-over-hand motions. Repeat on the opposite side.
5. Make smooth strokes with the fingers, lifting up from the area toward the navel.
6. Stand facing the client's face. You may need to stand on a stepstool.
7. Start with both hands at the navel, and slide around to the belly and waist to reach to the spine. Press into the erector spinae, pulling toward you slightly as you slide again to the belly. (Fig 4)
8. Repeat, reaching to different areas along the spine, rubbing there momentarily before sliding back to the belly and circling again.

### **DISPELLING MYTHS: Touching the Pregnant Belly**

Massage therapists have sometimes been taught to avoid any touch to a woman's belly---often just in the 1<sup>st</sup> trimester, and sometimes throughout pregnancy.

This restriction is typically based on a legitimate desire to avoid causing harm—a concern mostly based on uncertainty or ignorance about what is appropriate or not, as well as on a perception that pregnancy is a fragile condition. While there are dangers associated with pregnancy, it is not easy to dislodge a healthy baby in utero; all forces are working together to keep that baby inside! Therapeutic massage in general, and specifically to the belly, is *not* associated with miscarriage or early labor or fetal demise.

In the *first trimester*, the risk for a miscarriage is high. This is why people are often advised to avoid touching the abdomen--hoping to reduce questions of possible associations between recent massage and a subsequent miscarriage.

However, *first trimester* belly massage is actually often very appropriate, well received, and also important. Gentle massage on the belly, or at least sandwiching the belly and lumbar region between two hands simultaneously can be settling, relaxing, and reassuring for a client. It gives her a chance to attune to the growing life within. This may be especially helpful for someone who has avoided connecting with this baby, after having a previous miscarriage. It may help her make space for and find an inner peace with this new life and opportunity.

After the first trimester, when the miscarriage risk has reduced, belly massage continues to be a wonderful way to share with a growing mother and her child. The therapist should of course, always do a thorough health intake and ascertain there are no known risks for preterm labor or miscarriage. Belly rubs can occasionally stimulate temporary Braxton-Hicks or “practice” contractions. To avoid this, I suggest restricting belly rubs to a duration of no longer than 5 minutes or so up until the last couple weeks of pregnancy. At that point, longer belly massage may be desirable to encourage release of tension in the abdomen and uterine ligaments, to increase space for baby and for maternal rib expansion, and to support labor contractions.

### DEFINITIONS:

**Braxton-Hicks Contractions:** Irregular, mild tightening of the uterus “practice contractions”

**Miscarriage:** loss of the pregnancy before 20 weeks gestation

**Preterm labor:** contractions between 20-38 weeks gestation when the baby may still have difficulties surviving outside the womb.

**Placental Abruption:** When the placenta detaches from its circulatory attachments to the inside of the womb, causing the baby to lose it’s oxygen source, and causing the mother to hemorrhage.

### SUMMARY

During pregnancy, belly massage is a wonderful way to help a mother and baby attune with one another, as well as give the massage therapist a chance to directly massage baby and experience the thrill of feeling a new life responding and moving under your hands. There are a few precautions to keep in mind. A health intake prior to every massage is important to ensure that baby, placenta, uterus, and maternal blood pressure are all healthy and that there are no new high-risk concerns. Always approach the belly slowly, with care, knowing you are making contact with a mother’s particular sensitivities, and with a baby’s n experience of her or his body through your touch. Belly massage can be done anytime during pregnancy, as long as your client is agreeable, your pressure is respectful and caring, and nothing causes your client to question your intent or skill.