A Slippery Topic: The Use of Essential Oils during Pregnancy

By Chris Colón, Certified Genetic Counselor at MotherToBaby Arizona

We here at MotherToBaby are always looking for new and interesting topics to write about in our monthly blog series. We like to make sure that we do our best to target questions and concerns that are important to our readers. We of course spend a lot of time focused on over-the-counter and prescription medications, but not everyone feels comfortable taking traditional remedies. In fact, more and more people are looking to alternative medicine practices to treat a variety of conditions. Practices such as hypnosis, massage therapy and the use of essential oils is becoming more common.

As a teratogen information specialist I've fielded more than a few calls about the use of essential oils during pregnancy and breastfeeding. While information on the use of FDA-approved medications in pregnancy and breastfeeding is improving, reliable information on the use of products that are not regulated by the FDA is uncommon. Still, when callers want answers, it's our job to provide them with the most current and accurate data we can find.

Having no personal experience of my own with the use of essential oils, I wanted to talk to someone who did. Luckily, my friend, colleague and mom of three, Nicole Greer, was willing to share her personal story.

Nicole came to find out about the use of essential oils through a friend. "Three years ago, a friend invited me to her 'oils' party, and while I had no idea what that meant, because she was a good friend, I went to support her," she said. "When I arrived at the party, there were people trying different oils and discussing the life-altering differences oils had made for their families. Each of them had a story about changes such as elevated mood, better digestion issues, increased overall health – the list goes on."

While curious, Nicole was not ready to take the full plunge into oil therapy without some more information. "I went looking for credible sources to validate what I was hearing before I invested any time or money. I thought, if this is as great as they say it is, why haven't I heard about them before and why don't more people use them? Why isn't there use of these products in medical settings?"

Turns out there is. As the approaches to total patient care continue to change, more institutions are looking "outside the box" for treatments. There are many alternative medicine practitioners who use oils as part of their patient care routine. Vanderbilt University began using essential oils in their emergency room and their own study showed that the use of essential oils reduced stress and improved overall wellness among staff and patients. The Department of Integrative Medicine at Beth Israel Hospital in New York launched a program to help encourage self-care of its staff members, which includes essential oil therapy. And, there are large organizations both in the United States and abroad, that offer guidance on the practice of aromatherapy and the use of essential oils.

So what does all this mean for pregnancy and breastfeeding? Well, let's start with the basics. Before the use of any products, it's recommended to consult your healthcare provider to discuss the risks and the benefits. If you're looking for information on the use of oils during pregnancy and breastfeeding that can be found on the internet, here are a few tips:

Information is limited. Depending on the product in question, there may be few studies on its use in pregnancy and breastfeeding. For many products, there is no information at all. That doesn't mean that the oils are necessarily helpful or harmful; it means that they haven't been studied. The lack of data can sometimes make it hard to decide if the product should be used or not.

Not all information is created equal. Some information available is based on sound research and scientific proof. Some is "anecdotal", meaning it's based on people's experiences and not necessarily facts. When deciding what is best for you, make sure you're getting information from a reliable source.

Still talk with your healthcare provider. Information from books, media, and/or the internet may be helpful, but it cannot predict what exactly will happen with you. Everyone is different, and every pregnancy is different, too. What works for others may not work for you. There may be something in your medical history that makes using certain

products potentially more risky- even products that are not a problem for others. It's best to always check with a medical professional.

If you have used a product without knowing its possible side effects, don't panic. Call your healthcare provider. The use of products on the skin (topical) usually does not lead to large absorption by the person using them. That means not a lot is getting to the bloodstream, or to the baby. Constant use, use on broken or diseased skin, use over large areas of the body, use on certain body parts and swallowing of products have a greater rate of absorption by the body. However, assessing if there a possibility of negative effects on pregnancy or breastfeeding depends on what product is used, when in pregnancy it was used, and how much was used.

Nicole's experience with oils has been a positive one. "For me, the defining moment came when I had a headache, and decided to give some oils a try. I have been plagued by headaches my entire life. I have used over-the-counter pain medication for years, and still my headaches never completely went away until I used a few dabs of oils on my temples. Also, after using the oils for almost two years, I believe the amount of times my three children have been sick is much lower than before. I have many friends who all have similar stories now, and my kids and husband have certainly gotten on board now that they have seen results," she said.

Like everything else, the use of essential oils in pregnancy and breastfeeding is a very personal decision, and one that should be made after careful information gathering and thinking about what's best for you and your baby. MotherToBaby is available to help provide information for questions on the use of essential oils during pregnancy and breastfeeding. You can reach a teratogen information specialist by calling 866-626-6847 or by visiting www.MotherToBaby.org.

Chris Colón is a certified genetic counselor based in Tucson, Arizona and proud mother of two. She currently works for The University of Arizona as a Teratogen Information Specialist at MotherToBaby Arizona, formerly known as the Arizona Pregnancy Riskline. Her counseling experience includes prenatal and cardiac genetics, and she has served as MotherToBaby's Education Committee Co-chair since 2012.

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