The Pain of Pregnancy: Can Massage or Acupuncture Safely Help?

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Anyone who has been pregnant knows it's no walk in the park. From the intense nausea, vomiting, and strange cravings of the first trimester, to all the aches and pains of the third trimester, carrying a baby can feel like a marathon! It's no wonder pregnant women look high and low for any form of relief. Two questions we are asked frequently here at MotherToBaby are-"Can I get a massage?" and "Is acupuncture safe during pregnancy?"

Want a massage? Here's the rub…

At 38 weeks pregnant, my feet hurt, my back hurt, sometimes it felt like even my hair hurt! All I wanted was someone to knead all my aches and pains away. I wanted a massage, so being a MotherToBaby information specialist, I set out to research massage during pregnancy. On the plus side, studies have shown that massage can benefit pregnant women. Massage during pregnancy not only helps with those aches and pains, it has also been shown to decrease stress, help ease symptoms of depression, and increase feelings of wellbeing. Sounds pretty good, right?

So, should you run out and book that massage right this second? Not too fast – there are a couple of things to keep in mind. The safety of massage in the first trimester hasn't been studied well. Because of this, some massage therapists and medical professionals recommend avoiding massage during the first three months of pregnancy. If you do decide to get a massage in the first trimester, it's better to choose a massage that doesn't use heat (like a hot towel or hot stones), especially around the stomach area or lower back. This is because overheating during pregnancy can increase the risk of birth defects. See our fact sheet on hyperthermia for more information: https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/hyperthermia-pregnancy/.

When getting a massage at any point in pregnancy, choose a massage therapist who is trained to work with pregnant women. These therapists will know to avoid pressure in certain areas and will also know which places can get especially sore when you're carrying a baby. It's also best to avoid massages that apply a lot of pressure, like deep tissue massages, since these haven't been well studied. Finally, make sure your therapist knows whether you have any allergies to certain oils and that they are using products that are not known to increase risk during pregnancy.

If you're getting a massage in late pregnancy, the massage therapist may offer to apply pressure to certain points on your body that are thought to bring on labor. Studies have not shown that this actually induces labor, but to be on the safe side it's better to wait until you are at least 39 weeks pregnant to try.

What about acupuncture? A few points…

Acupuncture is a technique in which a trained practitioner inserts very small needles into certain points of the body. Stimulating these points is thought to help with pain, indigestion, infertility, and much more. Acupuncture is usually recommended to pregnant women to help with nausea and vomiting, and to relieve pain.

The available studies do not show an increased risk of birth defects or other pregnancy problems when pregnant women use acupuncture. The most common risk with acupuncture is to feel a little pain when the needles are placed. While the risk from acupuncture is low, studies also haven't shown that acupuncture necessarily helps with nausea, vomiting, or pain during pregnancy.

If you do decide to get acupuncture during pregnancy, be sure to find a trained practitioner. You may want to find a practitioner with experience working with pregnant women as well. Make sure your practitioner is not re-using needles from other clients as this may increase the risk of certain infections. Like massage, there are a few acupuncture points that are thought to bring on labor. Studies haven't shown that this will bring baby earlier, but it's best to avoid these points unless you are at least 39 weeks pregnant.

As with any treatment, it's best to talk to your healthcare provider before starting. Remember, we're here to help too! If you have any questions about massage, acupuncture, or any other exposure during pregnancy, you can contact an expert at MotherToBaby by calling 866-626-6847, texting 855-999-3525, or by live chat or email at

https://mothertobaby.org//a>.

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About MotherToBaby

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