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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By Lauren Bryl, MS, Certified Genetic Counselor, MotherToBaby IL

It's National Birth Defects Prevention Month, and you've found yourself here – standing in the pharmacy aisle in search of prenatal vitamins. You think, "I should start taking one of these if I want to have a baby, right? At least that's what I've heard…" Your eyes are swimming and head is spinning with all the options. "Should I choose the old-fashioned tablets, the fruit-flavored gummies, or the minty chewables? With DHA or without? Do I need extra calcium or vitamin D? Is 200% daily value better than 100%? This seems like a good one," you think to yourself. "Oh wait! Maybe this one is better…" Shelf after shelf of bottles of vitamins and supplements…but which one is right for you?

Give yourself a pat on the back.

First of all – well done, Mama! You've already made the most important decision by choosing to kick off your pregnancy journey with a solid supply of vitamins to support a growing baby! But why are prenatal vitamins so important anyway? Well, one of the main reasons is that deficiency of a vitamin called folate (also called folic acid) in very early pregnancy increases the risk for neural tube defects. Neural tube defects are a group of birth defects in which there is an opening in the spine. They include things like spina bifida. While the other vitamins and minerals may also provide benefits to mom and baby, the folic acid in the prenatal multivitamin is one of the most important for birth defect prevention. Taking folic acid prior to and during pregnancy is the best thing we can do to reduce the risk of neural tube defects.

Take a deep breath.

As a prenatal genetic counselor, I've had many patients ask me which prenatal vitamin is the best. While there are, of course, many factors that go into making a decision about which prenatal vitamin to take including cost considerations and personal preferences, I'm here to give some thoughts from a medical professional's perspective. First of all, you may not even have to make this choice yourself. Your doctor may prescribe you a prenatal vitamin with folic acid, so check with her first. But if she tells you to pick something up over the counter, don't panic.

Check the ingredients and their doses.

The exact vitamins and minerals that you, personally, will need in a multivitamin depends on a few things. One is

whether you have any known vitamin or mineral deficiencies or risk factors for such a deficiency. For example, vegans and vegetarians are more likely to have deficiency of vitamin B12, a vitamin found in meat and other animal products. The amounts of vitamins and minerals you receive through your diet should be considered. It is common for women to need extra help getting the recommended amounts of calcium, iron, and vitamin D. The daily recommended intakes for pregnant women over 18 years are 1,000 mg (milligrams) of calcium, 27 mg of iron, and 600 IU (International Units) of vitamin D. Some health care providers will also suggest docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) supplementation of 200 mg per day for those who do not eat fatty fish (like salmon and tuna) at least twice a week.

Regardless of your diet, folic acid supplementation is a must. The natural form of the vitamin found in certain foods (called folate) is not as well absorbed as the supplemental form (folic acid). Because of this, the U.S. Public Health Service recommends that all women of childbearing age take a folic acid supplement of 400 micrograms (0.4 mg) per day. Once you become pregnant, this dosage increases to 600 micrograms (0.6 mg) per day. If you are at higher risk for neural tube defects than the average woman because of family history or another factor, an even higher dosage may be recommended. You should consult with your health care provider for her recommendation.

With vitamins, more is not always better, though. While some vitamins are unlikely to be harmful even if taken at high dosages in pregnancy, this is not true for all. Specifically, very large amounts of supplemental vitamin A have the potential to increase the risk of birth defects and intellectual disabilities. For this reason, it is recommended that vitamin A supplementation not exceed 10,000 IU per day.

Don’t go too far off the beaten path.

Unlike medications and foods, vitamins and supplements are not regulated by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). This means that the FDA does not test vitamins and other supplements to ensure that they contain the ingredients written on their labels at the doses indicated. The FDA also does not test for contamination with other, potentially harmful ingredients in vitamins and supplements. It is the responsibility of those who make the vitamins to perform these types of tests to ensure quality and safety.
Does this mean that most vitamins are dangerous? No, but it does mean that it may be safer to choose a widely available multivitamin rather than one produced by a small, specialized manufacturer. Companies with wider distribution are under more pressure to produce a safe product than those whose products you may only be able to buy in a specialty store or through their website. If in doubt, speak with your healthcare provider or a pharmacist.

Choose what works for you.

While perhaps the most obvious point, choosing a vitamin that you will actually take is arguably the most important one as well. The perfect multivitamin won’t do you any good if it is gathering dust in the medicine cabinet. If even just the thought of swallowing a pill half the size of a golf ball every morning has you queasy, you could consider trying a liquid or chewable form. Iron in your prenatal vitamin giving you constipation? Ask your health care provider if it’s necessary that you have iron supplementation if you receive adequate amounts through the foods that you eat.

So if you find yourself in the pharmacy aisle overwhelmed with all the multivitamin options, try not to stress! Remember these tips and save that energy for other difficult decisions down the road…like choosing a preschool!

Lauren Bryl, MS, is a certified genetic counselor, licensed in the state of Illinois. She graduated from Haverford College with a Bachelor’s degree in molecular biology and earned a Master’s of science in genetic counseling at Northwestern University. Located out of Chicago, Lauren serves as the coordinator for MotherToBaby Illinois. Since 2011 she has counseled women, their family members and their

healthcare providers regarding the effects of exposures during both pregnancy and lactation. In addition to her role with MotherToBaby, Lauren is a clinical genetic counselor at Insight Medical Genetics where she provides both reproductive and hereditary cancer risk counseling.

***MotherToBaby** is a service of the international Organization of Teratology Information Specialists (OTIS), a suggested resource by many agencies including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). If you have questions about alcohol, medications, vaccines, diseases, or other exposures, call MotherToBaby toll-FREE at 866-626-6847 or try out MotherToBaby's **new text counseling service** by texting questions to (855) 999-3525. You can also visit **MotherToBaby.org** to browse a library of fact sheets.*

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