

PREGNANCY

time for a massage

Your body's working hard, so let an expert work some magic on your muscles. by JEANNETTE MONINGER

RUCHIKA JAIN was only four months pregnant with her second child, but her feet throbbed, her back ached, and sleep was difficult. At the advice of her doctor, the Seattle mom decided to try massage therapy. Not only did her aches and pains subside, but she even managed to nap during the sessions. “I felt rejuvenated,” Jain says, “and I had more energy to keep up with my 3-year-old son.”

Studies have found that moms-to-be can reap both mental and physical rewards from prenatal massage. In fact, massage is a common alternative therapy recommended by doctors for pregnant women. One reason: “Pregnancy does a number on your posture. It compresses your lower back, weakens your core, and places a lot of pressure on your legs and feet,” says Abigail Dennis, M.D., an ob-gyn at the Family Childbirth and Children’s Center at Mercy Hospital, in Baltimore. Find out the benefits (and differences) of prenatal massage—and how to get a good one.

→ the power of touch

Your muscles will certainly appreciate a massage when they’ve been carrying around an extra load. Plus, the weight of your growing baby can cause leg muscles to tense and swell. This inflames nearby nerves and can lead to sciatic nerve pain. “Applying mild pressure to your muscle groups helps reduce swelling by stimulating blood flow throughout your body,” says Elaine Stillerman,

a licensed massage therapist in New York City.

Beyond relieving tight muscles, there are other advantages of massage therapy: Studies from the Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami suggest that moms-to-be who get a weekly massage have lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol and higher levels of the feel-good hormones serotonin and dopamine. Researchers have linked these hormonal changes to fewer childbirth complications, including a 75 percent reduction in premature births among depressed women. Though you don’t need to be depressed to reap the benefits of massage, another Touch Research Institute study found that pregnant women suffering from depression had significant improvement in mood, as well as decreased anxiety, after receiving a 20-minute massage twice a week.

→ special care

A prenatal massage differs from a traditional one: For starters, you’ll likely be either lying on your side or sitting in a semi-reclining position. “Lying on your back puts too much pressure on your abdomen and can restrict blood flow,” says Dr. Dennis. To keep your spine in alignment and alleviate lower-back pressure, your therapist may use specially designed pillows or bolsters to support your knees and feet. You may have the option to lie facedown on a massage

table that has a hole for your belly. However, many women find this position uncomfortable, especially as their pregnancy progresses. Prenatal massages may also be shorter—30 to 45 minutes versus the usual 60 to 90 minutes.

No parts of the body are completely off-limits, even feet. While some people fear that massaging certain areas of the foot can bring on labor, “If this were true, every woman who was overdue would just get a foot massage instead of being induced in the hospital,” says licensed massage therapist and registered nurse Leslie Stager, author of *Nurturing Massage for Pregnancy*. Why does that unfounded belief persist? Most likely it stems from the fact that reflexology associates pressure points on the sides of the ankles with the ovaries and uterus, says Stager. “But pushing on these areas isn’t going to start contractions.”

Prenatal massage is generally considered safe, but talk to your ob-gyn first; she may advise against massage if your pregnancy is high risk or if you have a condition like preeclampsia or high blood pressure.

→ in capable hands

Requirements for massage-therapy training vary by state, and not every massage therapist will have prenatal experience. Look for someone who’s certified in prenatal massage, whether you go to a spa that offers prenatal massage or work with an independent therapist. “Certification ensures that the therapist has special training in treating common pregnancy discomforts and that she knows which body areas to treat differently during pregnancy,” says Stillerman. Ask your health-care provider for a recommendation, or visit the American Massage Therapy Association (amtamassage.org). Once you have a good referral, relax and get comfy on the table. ✕