

Pregnancy Massage

Preamble

The issues surrounding the application of massage therapy through all stages of pregnancy are specific. They include legal, medical, practitioner training and protection of the consumer and the practitioner. The Code of Ethics and Standards of Practiceⁱ governing massage therapy apply to working with pregnancy. This is particularly true with respect to risk and therapeutic relationship requirements about communication, consent and professional boundaries.

Massage Therapists, Remedial Massage Therapists and Myotherapists working with pregnant clients/patients must have an understanding of high-risk pregnancy. A clear understanding of the complex pathologies and conditions unique to pregnancy, and relevant to each trimester, is essential.

To avoid ethical complaints in relation to massage therapy during pregnancy, the client/patient must have available to them adequate information about the risks involved throughout all stages of pregnancy and informed consent prior to the treatment must be obtained.

Aim

This policy is to serve as a context for practitioners who provide massage treatments during pregnancy and to provide a platform from where the National Ethics Committee (NEC) can make an informed determination in relation to any complaints and for the National Education Committee (NEdC) to determine appropriate levels of training.

This policy should be read in conjunction with the Association's Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice and, in combination with the practitioners' level of education and own scope of practice. Massage & Myotherapy Australia (Association) is of the opinion that massage therapy during pregnancy is within the scope of practice of Massage Therapists, Remedial Massage Therapists and Myotherapists (Massage Therapists). However, for practitioners offering pregnancy massage they must undertake further specialised training in pregnancy massage other than the training received within the National Health Training Package (HLT)ⁱⁱ.

The Association's Board of Directors serves to protect both the membership and the public by adopting these Guidelines which is resolutely linked to the overall policy of the Code of Ethics and the Standards of Practice.

Process

Every massage practitioner has the right to make the decision as to the appropriateness of massage therapy during pregnancy, and in consultation with the client/patient. However, decision making and treatment protocols should be consistent, and in context, with the complexities of the pathophysiology and multi-system changes unique to pregnancy and within the scope of practice of the practitioner.

Pregnancy massage should not be considered without adequate assessment of the client/patient. A written medical clearance is required where the health of the client/patient and/or the child has the potential of compromise or is compromised. It is a recommendation to minimise risk by aligning pregnancy massage treatments with pre-natal check-ups. The complexities of the changes occurring in pregnancy require a greater understanding of the pathophysiology and multi-system changes unique to pregnancy. Both pre-natal and post-partum treatment require appropriate levels of training.

This approach ensures the integrity of the practitioner (scope of practice); that the client/patient has the most relevant health information in regard to themselves and their baby, and in consideration of the therapeutic relationship.

A practitioner must encourage clients/patients to inform their treating medical practitioner (if any) of the treatments or care being providedⁱⁱⁱ.

Massage practitioners should never, under any circumstance, proceed with treating the pregnant person without first obtaining written “informed consent” having provided the client/patient with information on how the massage therapy will be performed and of any associated risks.

Considerations

The following considerations have been developed to assist the practitioner specifically in the application of massage therapy of the pregnant client/patient. They do not cover all the requirements for each pregnancy as presentations are unique. The limitations of the practitioner must be considered with referral to the client’s/patient’s medical doctor if there are any concerns at all.

Before accepting the pregnant client/patient

- Are you adequately trained?
- Do you know the relevant and necessary set of medical, health and pregnancy related questions to ask before commencing treatment?
- Determine if the pregnant client/patient can receive massage therapy.
- Understand the changes occurring through each trimester to the mother and baby, and the affect of massage therapy.
- How does the practitioner support those changes?
- Understand contraindications for pregnancy massage.
- Understanding the medical terminology unique to pregnancy.
- Understanding the pathophysiological changes that are unique to pregnancy and what a high-risk pregnancy is^{iv}.
- Are you able to respond to emotive subjects, such as loss?
- Do you have the appropriate equipment to massage a pregnant person – pillows, bolsters, draping?
- Can the client/patient get on and off the table safely?
- Is the room clean and clear of strong aromas?
- Written medical clearance is to be obtained where the health of the woman and/or their child has the potential to be compromised or is compromised before treatment.
- The practitioner must encourage patients/clients to inform their treating medical practitioner (if any) of the treatments or care being provided^v.

How to plan risk mitigation for Pregnancy Massage in the first trimester

- Have appropriate specialised pregnancy massage training beyond the Diploma of Remedial Massage training.
- Develop a Pregnancy Massage Client History form which details the complex conditions of pregnancy.
- The pregnant client's/patient's records should include their healthcare providers contact details.
- Medical clearance is required if it has been established that the health of the client/patient and/or their baby is compromised. As there are many complex pathophysiology changes in pregnancy a well-trained pregnancy massage practitioner must understand and recognise these changes to determine the benefits of massage.
- Minimise risk by aligning pregnancy massage treatments with prenatal check-ups. The pregnant client/patient will then attend clinic with the most relevant health information of their pregnancy and their baby, and a medical referral can be given if required with any changes.

Contraindications for the entire Pregnancy

A contraindication is a specific situation or factor that makes a particular treatment, procedure, or drug inadvisable because it could be harmful to the client/patient. Practitioners must be aware of contraindications at all times. These must be checked at every treatment as the client/patient's circumstances will change each time.

Treatment Considerations for all Trimesters:

- Allow adequate time to gather and assess client/patient health and treatment plan.
- Massage table set-up to support the changes throughout the pregnancy.
- Ensure the most appropriate position on the table for the client/patient (Eg. side-lying, prone).
- Ensure the client/patient can get on and off the table safely and provide support if required.
- If the use of specific pregnancy bolsters/pillows is not available, the pregnant client/patient should be massaged on their side with legs raised (foetal position) with pillows placed for comfort.
- Only use massage oils appropriate to pregnancy.
- Use appropriate draping for client/patient comfort and modesty.
- At the end of treatment, assist the client/patient to change positions gradually and ensure they are steady before standing.
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- Do not use heated beds/electric blankets.
- Avoid tapotement or fast jostling in the legs.
- Use caution with pressure or strong techniques in pregnancy, especially if the client/patient is symptomatic. Instead apply comfort-based, well-tolerated pressure and modify treatment to the individual.

Pressure points in pregnancy

- Use caution with historically contraindicated pressure points in pregnancy, including:
 - GB 21: top of shoulder
 - LI 4: web between thumb and index
 - BL60: between lateral malleolus and Achilles tendon
 - SP6: client's hand width above medial malleolus along tibia
 - Bladder points on the sacrum

- LR3, K1: foot and bottom of foot
- Current evidence does not clearly show harm in low-risk pregnancy. (REFERENCE – Applying scientific rationale to the current perceptions and explanations of massage and miscarriage in the first trimester – Fogarty, Werner, James 2023). Use caution and modify treatment according to the individual and pregnancy risk profile.

Red Flags

- Oedema presenting with other symptoms such as: greater swelling in one leg than the other accompanied by pain; a persistent headache; changes to vision (blurred or light sensitive); chest pains or difficulty breathing are red flags. Refer the pregnant client/patient immediately to their medical practitioner.

Postpartum massage treatment

Postpartum massage may be beneficial for musculoskeletal discomfort and recovery, particularly in the back, hips, shoulders and related soft tissues. Treatment should be modified according to the client's/patient's birth history, wound healing, symptoms and overall recovery. Refer the client/patient to their medical practitioner for any abnormally painful or medical condition/symptoms.

ⁱ Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice

ⁱⁱ <https://training.gov.au/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Victorian Department of Health on behalf of the Australian Ministers Advisory Council, 2015

^{iv} McInerney, C. (2012). Journal of the Australian Association of Massage Therapists (2012)

^v Victorian Department of Health on behalf of the Australian Ministers Advisory Council (2015)