

# Perinatal & Postnatal Care

## FACT SHEET 7



### About this fact sheet

Massage therapists, remedial massage therapists and myotherapists (massage therapist or therapist), often fill the gap when patients seek alternatives to medications and other therapies because they feel that massage therapy provides a level of relief that is appropriate to their needs.

The following provides information to General Practitioners and other registered health professionals when discussing perinatal and postnatal care with patients.

As with all health-related therapies, no two people respond in the same way and no two therapists can provide a massage in the same way. Massage therapy or myotherapy may or may not be right for a patient. However, finding a professional, qualified therapist that you have confidence in, with the appropriate training, experience and skills, will assist in developing multidisciplinary pain management plans.

### Massage is safe during and after pregnancy

Many people believe that massage during pregnancy is not safe, particularly in the early or late stages of pregnancy. This is *not* correct.

Anecdotal and clinical evidence show that massage is safe during pregnancy when administered by a trained professional. It provides pain relief, relaxation, and has a positive effect for baby and mother during birth.

Member responses to a survey conducted by the Association, titled *Australian Association of Massage Therapists: Practitioner Survey 2012* (now trading as Massage & Myotherapy Australia), found that between 6 and 8 per cent of therapists provided specialist maternal and pregnancy-related services.

The following provides a summary of the evidence available.

### Massage can help to overcome physical and mental barriers to exercise

Massage can help to overcome physical barriers<sup>1</sup> to exercise during pregnancy. These barriers are commonly nausea, fatigue, lack of time, physical limitations, lack of social support, and lack of access to exercise facilities, as well as the discomforts of pregnancy itself.<sup>2</sup> Incorporating massage into a pregnancy-specific program can provide interpersonal support as well as heighten feelings of wellbeing.

Massage therapy has been shown to effectively reduce lower back pain<sup>3</sup> which is common in pregnancy while also reducing anxiety, depression and cortisol levels throughout the pregnant and post-partum periods. A 2018 Cochrane review concluded that massage, warm pack, and thermal manual methods may have a role in reducing pain and the length of labour as well as improving the sense of control and emotional experience of labour.<sup>4</sup>

### Reducing perineal trauma

A Cochrane review of four trials (2,497 women) concluded that antenatal digital perineal massage applied by women themselves or their partners reduces the likelihood of perineal trauma (mainly episiotomies) and the reporting of ongoing perineal pain; and that women generally will accept this. The authors concluded that women should be made aware of the likely benefit of perineal massage and provided with information on how to massage themselves.<sup>5</sup>

A more recent 2015 study<sup>6</sup> involved an open-label, assessor blind, randomised controlled trial, involving two public hospitals in Sydney, Australia. This study evaluated the effect of an antenatal integrative medicine education program in addition to the usual care for nulliparous women on intrapartum epidural use. The study found that the Complementary Therapies for Labour and Birth study protocol significantly reduced epidural use and caesarean section. The study provided evidence for integrative medicine as an effective adjunct to antenatal education, and contributes to the body of best practice evidence.

Researchers of another 2013 study involving 195 nulliparous women found similar results and concluded that perineal massage during the second stage of labour can reduce the need for interventions associated with episiotomy, perineal injuries and perineal pain.<sup>7</sup>

As an addition to these improvements, massage has also been shown to reduce premature birth and low birthweight.<sup>8,9</sup>

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### Massage effects on measures of pain, relaxation and symptoms of stress

A single blind clinical trial<sup>10</sup> found that the positive effects of massage are short-term, but the evidence of more recent studies<sup>11</sup> shows that achieving a long-term reduction in blood pressure lies in combining activity with massage. Findings suggest that Manual Lymphatic Drainage Massage may be a valuable nonpharmacological auxiliary therapy in the control of arterial hypertension. The results also indicate that, when performed in association with a regular program of aerobic dynamic physical exercises, significant increases in the reduction of values of blood pressure of hypertensive subjects were achieved.

During 2017, researchers<sup>12</sup> assessed the post-operative patients by conducting a systematic review and meta-analysis. They reported that the effect of single dosage massage therapy on post-operative pain showed significant improvement and

the anxiety subgroups showed substantial heterogeneity. They concluded that massage therapy may alleviate post-operative pain, although there are limits on generalisation of these findings due to low methodological quality in the reviewed studies.

A 2013 study<sup>13</sup> into the effects of Swedish Massage Therapy on blood pressure, heart rate and inflammatory markers in hypertensive women, found that Swedish Massage Therapy, or resting for an hour weekly, significantly reduced blood pressure, heart rate and vascular endothelial adhesion molecules. However, the effect of rest on blood pressure does not extend to four weeks as compared to Swedish Massage Therapy. In addition, massage also reduces the resting heart rate in hypertensive women.

### More information

Through a simple Google search you can find more information from the following reliable sources:

- » [Australian Massage Directory](#) – find a professional qualified local therapist
- » [Massage & Myotherapy Australia](#) website – consumer section
- » [Australian Government Health Directory](#) – free health advice
- » [US Department of Health and Services](#) – massage therapy - what you need to know.

### Endnotes

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11. Helio Franklin Rodrigues de Almeida et al.2018. 'Effects of manual lymphatic drainage massage associated with physical exercise program in morphological-functional blood pressure parameters', *International Journal of Advanced Engineering Research and Science* (ISSN: 2349-6495(P) | 2456-1908(O)), vol. 5, no. 12, 2018.
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