

# Perinatal & Postnatal Care

## FACT SHEET 7



### About this fact sheet

Remedial massage therapists, remedial massage therapists and myotherapists (professional qualified therapists) often fill the gap when patients seek alternatives to medication and other therapies because they feel that remedial massage therapy and myotherapy provides a level of treatment and relief appropriate to their needs.

While a proportion of remedial massage therapy and myotherapy treatments are initiated by patients self-directing their care, many appointments are initiated through a referral from a registered medical practitioner such as a GP or an allied health practitioner.

Remedial massage therapy and myotherapy is not a cure for disease, injury or a chronic condition. However, it can provide relief from pain and stress, improve mobility, and help rehabilitation and recovery. Patients should always seek medical advice first when new conditions or pain arise.

The following will assist you in understanding what a professional qualified therapist is, and how the appropriate training, experience and skills can help in maintaining or restoring a level of health and wellbeing.

### Massage is safe during and after pregnancy

It is recommended to seek treatment from a therapist who has undertaken additional training in pregnancy massage.

Anecdotal and clinical evidence show that pregnancy massage provides pain relief, relaxation, and has a positive effect for baby and mother during birth.

Researchers found that the benefits during pregnancy included reduced stress, back and leg pain, depression and anxiety; increased immune response; increased serotonin and dopamine levels; higher fetal birth weight and reduced risk of preterm delivery when administered by a trained professional.<sup>1</sup>

The views and practices of Australian therapists in relation to preconception, pregnancy and the early postpartum period

were recorded in a 2020 study. Participants reported that they offered pregnancy, postnatal, and fertility massage for a mean of 8.1%, 6.4% and 5.8% of their total weekly practice hours, respectively. They also reported pregnancy massage intended to stimulate labour (mean 5.8%), massage for labour preparation (mean 3.6%), and partner massage for labour (mean 3.9%) as a proportion of their total clinical practice time per week.

The findings of this study appear to correlate with member responses to the Massage & Myotherapy Australia 2023 Practitioners' Survey, which found that 49% of member therapists provide specialist maternal and pregnancy-related services.

### Overcoming physical and mental barriers to exercise

Massage during pregnancy can help to overcome the physical barriers<sup>2</sup> to exercise during pregnancy which include nausea, fatigue, lack of time, physical limitations, lack of social support, lack of access to exercise facilities and pregnancy discomforts.<sup>3</sup> Frequent enablers included maternal and foetal health benefits (intrapersonal), social support (interpersonal) and pregnancy-specific programs.

In this regard, massage therapy has been shown to effectively reduce lower back pain<sup>4</sup> 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, reducing length of labour and improving women's sense of control and emotional experience of labour.<sup>5</sup>

# Perinatal & Postnatal Care

## FACT SHEET 7



### Reducing perineal trauma

During 2020, researchers analysed eleven Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs) with 3,467 patients<sup>6</sup> and found that women who received antenatal perineal massage had a significantly lower incidence of episiotomies and perineal tears, particularly the risk of third and fourth-degree perineal tears. Better wound healing and less perineal pain were evident in the antenatal perineal massage group. Antenatal perineal massage reduced the second stage of labour duration and incontinence with significant improvement in Apgar scores at 1 and 5 minutes.

A 2015 study<sup>7</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 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.

As a secondary effect to these improvements, pregnancy massage has also been shown to reduce premature birth and low birthweight.<sup>8,9</sup>

### Effects on measures of pain, relaxation and symptoms of stress

A 2020 meta-analysis of eight RCTs found that massage therapy during pregnancy might be more effective in reducing pregnant women's anxiety and depression than usual care.<sup>10</sup>

Evidence gathered in a 2018 study<sup>11</sup> found 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 non-pharmacological 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.

A 2013 study<sup>12</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.

During 2017, researchers<sup>13</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.

### More information:

- » [Australian Massage Directory](#) - find a professional qualified local therapist
- » [Massage & Myotherapy Australia](#) website - consumer section
- » [Australian Government Health Directory](#) - free health advice
- » [Better Health Channel](#) - Complementary and alternative care - [Massage](#) and [Myotherapy](#)
- » [Oncology Massage Training](#) provides a [national directory](#) of oncology massage therapists



## Endnotes

- Mueller, SM, Grunwald, MJ Clin. [Effects, Side Effects and Contraindications of Relaxation Massage during Pregnancy: A Systematic Review of Randomized Controlled Trials](#). Med. 2021, 10, 3485. <https://doi.org/10.3390/jcm10163485>
- Sytsma TT, Zimmerman KP, Manning JB, et al. [Perceived Barriers to Exercise in the First Trimester of Pregnancy](#). J Perinat Educ. 2018;27(4):198-206. doi:10.1891/1058-1243.27.4.198
- Anne Harrison, Nicholas Taylorac, Nora Shield, Helena Frawley. [Attitudes, barriers and enablers to physical activity in pregnant women: a systematic review](#). Journal of Physiotherapy, Volume 64, Issue 1, January 2018, pp. 24-32
- Lee, HJ and Ko, YL, 2015. [Back massage intervention for relieving lower back pain in puerperal women: a randomized control trial study](#). International journal of nursing practice, 21, pp.32-37.
- Smith CA, Levett KM, Collins CT, Dahlen HC, Ee CC, Sukanuma M. [Massage, reflexology and other manual methods for pain management in labour](#). *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews 2018*, Issue 3, Art. No.: CD009290. DOI: 10.1002/14651858.CD009290.pub3
- Abdelhakim AM, Eldesouky E, Elmagd IA, Mohammed A, Farag EA, Mohammed AE, Hamam KM, Hussein AS, Ali AS, Keshta NHA, Hamza M, Samy A, Abdel-Latif AA. [Antenatal perineal massage benefits in reducing perineal trauma and postpartum morbidities: a systematic review and meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials](#). Int Urogynecol J. 2020 Sep;31(9):1735-1745. doi: 10.1007/s00192-020-04302-8. Epub 2020 May 12. PMID: 32399905.
- Kate M Levett, CA Smith, A Bensoussan and HG Dahlen, [Complementary therapies for labour and birth study: a randomised controlled trial of antenatal integrative medicine for pain management in labour, 2015](#). BMJ Volume 6, Issue 7
- Field, T, Diego, M, Hernandez-Reif, M, Deeds, O and Figueiredo, B. 2009. [Pregnancy massage reduces prematurity, low birthweight and postpartum depression](#). *Infant Behavior and Development*, 32(4), pp.454-460.
- Hall, HG, Cant, R, Munk, N, Carr, B, Tremayne, A, Weller, C. [Pregnancy massage reduces prematurity, low birthweight and postpartum depression](#). *Infant Behavior and Development*, 32(4), pp.454-460.
- Hall, HG, Cant, R, Munk, N, Carr, B, Tremayne, A, Weller, C, Fogarty, S and Lauche, R, 2020. [The effectiveness of massage for reducing pregnant women's anxiety and depression: systematic review and meta-analysis](#). Midwifery, p.102818.
- HG. Hall a b, R Cant a, N. Munk b c, B. Carr a, A. Tremayne a, C Weller a, S Fogarty d, R. Lauche. [The effectiveness of massage for reducing pregnant women's anxiety and depression: systematic review and meta-analysis](#). Midwifery, Volume 90, November 2020, 102818
- Helio Franklin Rodrigues de Almeida et al., [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.
- Supa'at, I, Zakaria, Z, Maskon, O, Aminuddin, A, Nordin, NA. [Effects of Swedish massage therapy on blood pressure, heart rate, and inflammatory markers in hypertensive women](#). Evid Based Complement Alternat Med. 2013;2013:171852. doi:10.1155/2013/171852
- Kukimoto, Y, Ooe N and Ideguchi N, [The Effects of Massage Therapy on Pain and Anxiety after Surgery: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis](#). Pain Manag Nurs. 2017;18(6):378-390. doi:10.1016/j.pmn.2017.09.001