



MESSAGE TECHNIQUES



‘Positive touch communicates love and support in pregnancy and labour’


This is an easy to follow step-by-step guide to using simple massage and positive touch in pregnancy and labour.

Katie Whitehouse is an expert massage therapist and pregnancy and labour massage instructor. Katie has brought touch into the lives of many parents-to-be through her writing and classes.

The importance of positive touch

Positive touch is vital for our wellbeing. Whether we are a baby, a mother, a child, a middle-aged man or an elderly woman – we all need touch to thrive. Of all our senses, touch is, in a way, the greatest. Our skin is actually the largest organ in our body, yet it is often taken for granted. The benefits of touch, although now well researched, are largely ignored.

This is partly because our basic need for touch is, ironically, intangible: when we need a drink we feel thirsty, when we need food we feel hungry... but if the need for touch is not satisfied the consequences are less obvious and so they are easily overlooked. However, the consequences of long-term touch deprivation are actually profound.



When we are **touch deprived** we may experience:

- Insomnia
- Depression
- Aggressive feelings
- Low self-esteem
- Increased stress hormones
- Isolation
- Hyperactivity

When we are **touched positively** we may experience:

- Better sleep patterns
- Stimulation of endorphins
- Feelings of wellbeing
- Increased self-esteem
- Relaxation
- Ability to relate to others
- Reduced pain

Massaging in pregnancy and labour: positive support and connection

Your relationship with your baby begins long before they are born. By using positive touch during pregnancy you and your partner are sowing the seeds for greater connection with your baby after they are born. There is well documented evidence of how relaxation when you are pregnant benefits you and your baby – massage is the perfect way to achieve this. Using massage in labour involves the father or birth partner in a supportive and positive way. The simple strokes in this section are relaxing and relieving.

Benefits of massage during pregnancy and labour

Benefits of massage during pregnancy

Pregnancy is a critical time of transition for a couple. There are so many changes going on: physical, emotional, financial... using massage throughout pregnancy is a simple way of helping all parties.

- ▶ It relaxes you both
- ▶ It is a way for you both to communicate and connect with your unborn baby
- ▶ Both father and mother can feel more positively connected with the mother's changing body
- ▶ The father can feel more included in the pregnancy
- ▶ If practised during pregnancy massage is also likely to be useful in labour

Benefits of massage during labour

- ▶ Relaxes you both
- ▶ Can help create a pleasant atmosphere in the birthing room
- ▶ Stimulates endorphins – the body's natural opiates
- ▶ Communicates love, support and reassurance (nonverbally, labour is no time for in-depth discussion!)
- ▶ Gives confidence to the father
- ▶ Can help with the conservation of energy and recovery between contractions
- ▶ Helps to provide relief from the pain and intensity of contractions.

A couple of tips

The best massage oil to use

Your skin absorbs up to 60% of what you put on it – purity and nourishment are really important when choosing what to use, especially when you are pregnant: your skin is under stress and you need to consider your baby too!

When not to massage

Gentle massage is very safe, but there are times when it may be uncomfortable for a woman to receive massage:

- if she has a fever or feels at all unwell
- directly over skin that has sores, cuts, burns, inflammation or infectious rashes
- directly after a large meal

If you are in any doubt whatsoever, consult your GP or midwife.

When to massage

You can massage any time – but the best times are when you know you can let go a bit and forget about the day and outside pressures.

Note:

Massage should be soothing and NEVER painful. If it is uncomfortable stop straight away.

GETTING STARTED: 0–16 WEEKS

Getting to grips with the fact that your baby really is growing inside your partner is a big thing. Simply spending some time sitting together – father behind mother with hands overlapping over the mother’s lower tummy – can be a good way of beginning to tune in and spending some time being together (all three of you).

Keep your hands still. Talking and singing or playing soothing music can be part of this.

Sharing the experience

Massage is good for you both – mother and father! Spend five minutes each, gently massaging each other’s scalp, shoulders and neck. Use soothing strokes to calm and gentle squeezing to ease tension. A gentle foot massage is also very relaxing especially at the end of a fraught day.

Most important: Always ask permission to massage.

MASSAGE IN THE SECOND TRIMESTER: WEEKS 16–30

Keep massaging in the same way, but you can follow these guidelines for the tummy massage as your baby grows.

Tummy massage

Stroking over the tummy should be slow and very gentle. Use some oil and skin to skin contact. Try big slow circular movements over the whole belly, and slow long strokes from under the rib cage down towards the hips and groin. Remember this is a chance for you both to tune in with your baby.

MASSAGE IN THE THIRD TRIMESTER AND PRACTISING FOR LABOUR: WEEKS 30–40

Now you can start practising massage techniques that will not only help relieve some of the tensions of later pregnancy, but can also be really useful for labour itself – helping the mother relax and relieving discomfort.

Positions

The ideal is to find a position where the mother's shoulders are in front of her hips. This is a great position to encourage good positioning of your baby in the last trimester and also the best position for labour.

It is also important to be able to move your hips and your shoulders. Try these positions:

- On all fours
- Standing and leaning forward onto back of chair
- Sitting on a birthing ball
- Kneeling
- Leaning forward flopped onto pillows or bed

Note: If you tire of one position move to another – try and keep upright and mobile in early labour.

SOOTHING STROKES DURING LABOUR

These strokes are ideal between contractions and help the mother to recover and get some energy for the next contraction.

1. Waterfall

Start slowly, stroking with one relaxed hand from the nape of the neck all the way down to the base of the spine. Keep repeating with alternate hands so that there is a long, continuous, flowing movement.

Tips for fathers:

Keep your movements slow and soothing – allow your hands to be completely relaxed and mould to the shape of the mother's body. If you notice her shoulders are tense and pulled up towards her ears then gently stroke them down. Tune in with her breathing and keep your own out breath long and slow as you massage downwards.

SOOTHING STROKES DURING LABOUR

These strokes are ideal between contractions and help the mother to recover and get some energy for the next contraction.

2. Hearts

Use both hands – start with hands between the shoulder blades and then stroke up and out over the shoulders. Bring hands towards each other so that they meet at the base of the spine before stroking up and over the shoulders again. This movement traces a heart shape on the mother's back. The heart shape communicates love and support.



Tips for fathers:

You will need to practise these techniques in the last trimester of pregnancy in order for them to be useful in labour. Encourage lots of feedback as to what the mother wants in terms of favourite technique and amount of pressure. You need to build up a language of non-verbal communication (e.g. if she wants more pressure she pushes her body into your hand further; a raised hand means stop etc) as in labour itself conversation is inappropriate and disruptive. Techniques need to be firm but should be relieving, *not* painful.

FIRMER STROKES DURING PREGNANCY AND LABOUR

These strokes are pain-relieving during contractions. You need to apply them wherever contractions are felt, which could be lower back, tops of legs/groin, or tummy.

The **lower back** muscles are under great stress towards the end of pregnancy so massaging them can give great relief from muscle tension. In labour, contractions may well be felt in the lower back/sacrum (the flat bone at the base of the spine) and firm massage here can be very relieving.



1. Sacral circles

Use the heel of one or both hands to apply firm pressure to the sacrum (this is the flat bone at the base of the spine). Use plenty of bodyweight behind this one, and move hand/hands round in a circular or figure of eight movement while maintaining the pressure.

Tips for fathers:

Use bodyweight – not arm strength; lean into the massage as much as possible – save your strength as you could be massaging for some time!

FIRMER STROKES DURING PREGNANCY AND LABOUR

These strokes are pain-relieving during contractions. You need to apply them wherever contractions are felt, which could be lower back, tops of legs/groin, or tummy.

2. Hip kneading

Make a fist with each hand and use to knead deeply into the buttock muscles with the flat part of your fists (or use the heels of your hands). Lean in and allow the pressure to sink through your fists into the muscles. As the contraction intensifies, your fists can be turned backwards and forwards, while leaning in further. This will make the technique deeper and more relieving. You can try working deeply into different areas of the buttock muscles. Be guided by the mother as to the most relieving areas for her, as this will vary from woman to woman.

3. Tops of legs

Use the heels of your hands to sink into the top of the legs – maintain the pressure as you slide your hands down the legs – breathing out.

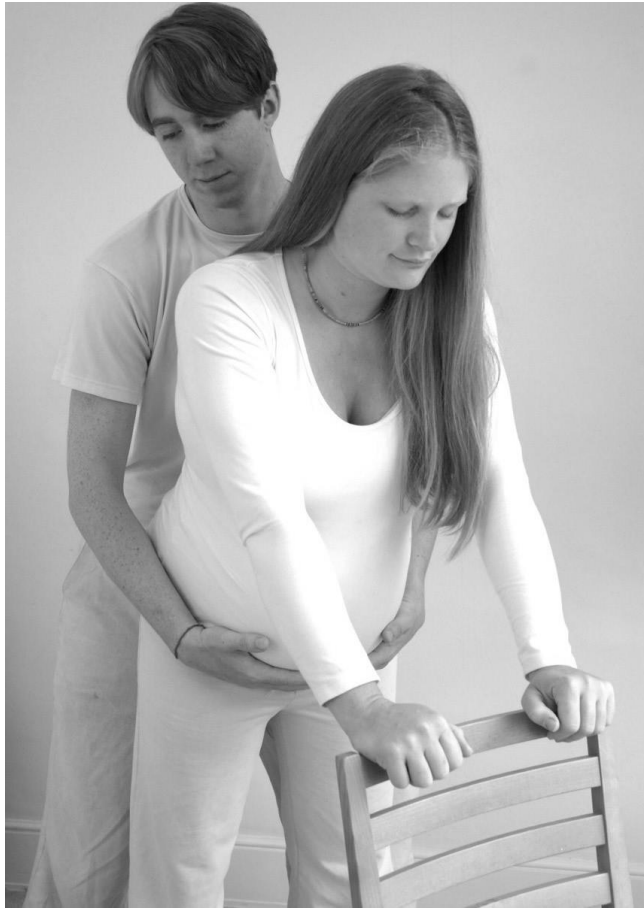
Tips for fathers:

When practising **sacral circles** and **hip kneading** in the third trimester, fairly firm pressure can be used – but during a contraction it will need to be very firm (guided of course by the mother's wishes).

Adapt the strokes to suit you and your partner – you could use elbows if you have practised a lot.

FIRMER STROKES DURING PREGNANCY AND LABOUR

These strokes are pain-relieving during contractions. You need to apply them wherever contractions are felt, which could be lower back, tops of legs/groin, or tummy.



4. Tummy

Practise this gently during pregnancy. In labour, during a contraction you can apply more pressure as you slide your hands apart. Start with your hands together under the mother's bump. As she breathes out, slide your hands gently but firmly out towards her sides. Slide your hands in to meet at the centre of her tummy and then slide them back down to the starting point as she breathes in again and repeat as necessary throughout the contraction.

Other ideas and tips

Whilst it is best to keep shoulders in front of hips during pregnancy and upright and mobile in labour, there may be times when she needs to rest. Try a side-lying position with her uppermost leg bent and supported on pillows. It has been found that lying on the left side is ideal for foetal positioning (i.e. to help the baby move into the best position for birth).

Foot and hand massage

If the mother needs to be monitored, or has an epidural, a foot, hand or shoulder massage can be very reassuring. The most important thing is that the mother is comfortable and as relaxed as possible. Massage can help bring some of your home environment into a labour room in a hospital – especially if you have practised!

Other ideas and tips

Tips for stage one

This stage begins with regular contractions, building up in strength, duration, and frequency, getting closer together as the mother's cervix dilates from 0–10cm to allow the baby's head to pass through into the birth canal. The following may be helpful:

- ▶ Using massage for relaxation and to ease discomfort
- ▶ Staying upright and mobile with shoulders in front of hips
- ▶ Keeping hips moving
- ▶ Being held and supported
- ▶ Deep warm baths (once labour is established)
- ▶ Breathing – focus on the out breath during contractions – make it long and drawn out

Encourage her to listen to and trust her instincts. She can move into the position that feels right for her and change position as she feels necessary – and make any noises that feel helpful to her. Above all she can try to keep an open mind and try and stay as calm as possible.

Tips for transition

This is when the cervix is almost fully dilated and she is building up to stage two (the actual birth). She may feel a sudden change of mood, or a state of altered being; possibly a need to be left alone. The following may be helpful:

- ▶ Inhaling scented oils
- ▶ Kneeling or leaning forward
- ▶ Sips of water
- ▶ Cool water on a flannel to mop her brow
- ▶ Making long, drawn-out noises
- ▶ Focussing on the slow outbreath
- ▶ Sacral circles

Once your baby is born

Try to ensure that your partner, or you if she cannot, has **prolonged skin-to-skin contact with your baby** as soon as possible after they are born.

BRINGING TOUCH INTO EVERYDAY LIFE

We live in a touch-deprived and busy world. Whether we were massaged as babies or not, and whether or not we massaged our own babies, in my experience it is never too late to start. It can be very simple to bring massage and positive touch into our everyday lives. With the clear boundary that touch must always be wanted and that we should be able to say no to unwanted touch, I believe that a profound difference could be made very simply. As well as massaging your baby you could also try:

- Offering someone you know who is elderly and possibly rarely touched (maybe your own parent or grandparent) a hand massage next time you visit. It is unintrusive but really relaxing and easy to carry on talking while you do it.
- Offering your children a very gentle soothing back massage before they go to sleep. Simply stroke downwards from head/neck to the base of their spine. You can do this over their pyjamas so they are able to stay relaxed and drop off to sleep.
- Offering your partner a five-minute neck and shoulder massage this evening.

Katie Whitehouse is the founder of Vital Touch, who make the Natalia range of oils for use in pregnancy and labour.

The prenatal body and bath oil is cold-pressed organic sunflower and rich avocado oil with an appropriate dilution of organic roman chamomile, lavender and sweet orange to relax and warm tense muscles and relieve stress.

The labour massage oil is organic sunflower oil with a supportive blend of clary sage, jasmine and uplifting bergamot.

Natalia instant energiser can be used to inhale during labour. For more details see www.vitaltouch.com.