

Soothing oils for pregnancy

Pregnancy is a magical time, but it can also be uncomfortable in many ways. Whether it's an aching back or increased levels of stress and anxiety, essential oils can alleviate many common pregnancy complaints and make this time that bit more comfortable.

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Pregnancy is an exciting time filled with anticipation and joy. It is also a time of transformation in which your body goes through aches and pains, hormone fluctuations and many other changes — not to mention the emotional shifts as you move from one trimester to another. Add to the mix a rapidly changing body, and pregnancy can be quite a challenging time.

It's natural to search for remedies that will help with pregnancy complaints. One such intervention is the use of essential oils and aromatherapy, which is quickly becoming commonplace among pregnant women. But there are a few things to watch out for in order to ensure the safety of you and your baby. It is critical to understand what essential oils to use and how to use them during the three trimesters and when you're in labour.

As aromatherapy expert and author of *A Scented Life*, Pat Princi-Jones says, "It is important to respect the healing potential of pure essential oils and take into account that they are 70 times stronger than their plant counterpart."

Essential oils are volatile liquids derived from various plants through steam or hydro-distillation of leaves, roots, seeds, flowers or bark. Only some oils, like citrus oils, are cold-pressed. Essentially, a large amount of plant material produces only a small amount of concentrated oil, which is present in all plant organs and leaves at a low concentration of 0.1 to 1 per cent, with some exceptions such as clove oil, which has a 10 per cent concentration.

The chemical composition of each essential oil is unique, depending on the plant source. But all oils primarily consist of terpenes, which give the oils their distinct aromas and impart powerful antimicrobial, antioxidant, anti-inflammatory and pain-relieving abilities — just by using a small amount.

"In order to fully appreciate why essential oils have such an immediate and profound impact on our psyche and body, we need to understand two physiological processes: how the olfactory system works and how essential oils are absorbed into the body," says Princi-Jones.

When essential oils are inhaled, millions of receptor cells in the nose send messages through the olfactory nerve to the limbic system — the part of the brain responsible for memory, emotions and behaviour. Within milliseconds, the limbic system analyses the odour message and

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conveys it to other parts of the brain that control blood pressure, breathing, stress levels, heart rate and hormone balance. The biological processes of inhaled essential oils by the olfactory system can have a profound impact on our overall health and wellbeing.

"When applied topically, essential oil compounds are absorbed into the body through the pores of the skin, the sweat glands and the hair follicles," says Princi-Jones. Because essential oils can dissolve in fat, they are able to penetrate the skin's natural fat and disperse into underlying organs and tissues.

"One of the wonders of aromatherapy is that the healing powers of essential oils can be utilised for just about any condition or phase in a woman's life, and pregnancy

is no exception," explains Princi-Jones. "Essential oils are capable of enhancing mood, balancing hormones and helping with those annoying discomforts often experienced during this time."

But the use of essential oils in pregnancy is a controversial topic. One of the primary concerns is that there is not enough research into how essential oils impact the developing foetus. When applied topically, essential oils penetrate the skin or other tissues within a matter of 20 minutes and can even cross the blood-brain barrier. This is a concern that because the placenta is known to be permeable to many essential oils, there is an increased risk of toxicity to the foetus.

While the level of toxicity depends on the plasma concentration of the essential oil, the foetus is less likely to tolerate the substances than the mum-to-be, according to Robert Tisserand and Rodney Young, authors of *Essential Oil Safety: A Guide for Health Care Professionals*.

"The dangers of systemic toxicity increase tenfold with oral administration," says Princi-Jones, emphasising that essential oils should not be ingested during pregnancy as the amount of essential oil reaching the foetus can be high. But if applied topically either through massage or a compress, a recommended dilution of less than 1 per cent, or no more than four drops in a bath, then the amount of essential oil that reaches the placenta is minuscule.

The International Federation of Professional Aromatherapists (IFPA) pregnancy guidelines state that "small amounts of essential oils can be beneficial to the baby and there are no recorded instances of harm being caused to the child through essential oils used in aromatherapy massage."

According to IFPA, it's important to remember the extra layer of fat you develop under the skin by the second trimester as a barrier between the essential oil



your growing baby. The essential oils are absorbed and dissolve in the fat from where it releases slowly into other tissues.

"Given essential oil use is trending at present, extra care needs to be taken to ensure you are choosing a true and authentic essential oil from a reputable supplier," adds Princi-Jones. "It's important to do some of your own research and above all make sure you trial all of the oils and the impact they have on you before you commence use."

First trimester

The first 13 weeks of your pregnancy are most crucial as your baby develops major organs, and any risk to the baby should be avoided. Some essential oils are also linked to uterine contractions, and with no clear evidence available they can potentially put

you and your baby's health at risk.

"Don't use oils topically at all during this time," warns Princi-Jones. "Simply diffuse a few drops of your favourite citrus peel for a one hour interval, such as lemon or tangerine to uplift your spirits." Experts also warn against the use of aromatherapy products during the first trimester, as these products contain essential oils.

Recommended oils to diffuse (only) for your first trimester: Ginger, lavender, lemon, mandarin, Roman camomile, spearmint, tangerine.

Second and third trimesters

By the second and third trimester, your

baby is more developed, and you can use specific oils topically through massage or in a bath, provided you are having a healthy pregnancy.

Aimee Sing, a Blue Mountains-based doula, lactation expert and mum of three, says she used essential oils in the second and third trimesters after consulting with an aromatherapist. "I mostly used lavender essential oil for easing headaches, nausea and for sleep, it made such a massive difference!" she says. "I also used wild orange essential oil during the later parts of my pregnancy to provide an energy boost." In her third trimester, Sing found these oils to be particularly helpful in easing uncomfortable symptoms associated with fatigue, hormonal headaches, sleeplessness and restless legs.



Melbourne-based mum of two, aromatherapist and infant massage instructor Catherine Cervasio used a blend of camomile and lemon to relieve heaviness and pain in her legs, occurring in the later part of her pregnancy. "The lemon historically said to be a 'vasoconstrictor' [helps support vein wall strength] perfectly balanced with the earthy aroma of the camomile," she says.

Essential oils are used in the second and third trimesters for several pregnancy complaints, including for relieving aches and pains, for restful sleep, to uplift moods, to alleviate nervous tension and for relaxation. One of the most common concerns is the appearance of stretch marks, affecting almost 90 per cent of women. Certain essential oils have shown promising results in reducing the appearance of stretch marks.

Cervasio, who has developed an award-winning brand of natural skincare, applied a blend of petitgrain and mandarin together with organic rose hip and natural vitamin E oil to minimise stretch marks during her first pregnancy. "By the time I was in my second pregnancy I had developed this fabulous blend into an even richer, moisturising mix with avocado and jojoba oils."

Stress is another common complaint during pregnancy, along with mood swings and emotional ups and downs, although excessive stress can increase your risk for certain complications such as pre-eclampsia, miscarriage, preterm birth and low birth weight for your baby.

Some essential oils are useful for relieving stress and have been known for their calming effect on the mind. "I believe using essential oils in vaporisers around the house or placing a drop of oil on the collar of my clothes played a big part in

being able to cope with stress," says Gold Coast-based aromatherapist and prenatal massage therapist Carley Borman, who experienced extreme stress during her first pregnancy and found that using bergamot, geranium and patchouli helped her manage her stress levels. "I also managed early pregnancy nausea the same way, wearing peppermint oil on my collar."

Another popular essential oil known for its calming effect is lavender oil, derived from lavender flowers. Studies have shown the relaxing benefits of lavender oil, and when properly used during pregnancy and labour it can calm the nerves, soothe aches and pains and even reduce labour pain.

"Some people are turned off by lavender, but this could be because a particular variety isn't appealing," says Cervasio. "I love French lavender, which is softer and truer to 'lavender' compared to, say, a more camphorous lavender, often grown in the lower regions." For those who don't like the smell of lavender, rose oil is a great option. This floral oil, often associated with the heart chakra, is known to reduce stress and can alleviate anxiety during labour.

Studies have found Roman camomile oil has a gentle relaxing effect on the central nervous system, thus encouraging stress relief and even offering relief from migraines. Geranium oil is another effective option, proven to be effective in reducing anxiety in the first stage of labour.

Recommended oils for second and third trimesters: Bergamot, frankincense, grapefruit, lime, neroli, patchouli, petitgrain, rose absolute, sandalwood.

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Labour

Increasingly, essential oils are becoming a staple in birth plans and are a part of an extensive toolkit used by doulas and midwives during labour.

A 2011 Cochrane review discovered that the pain associated with labour was less in women who used aromatherapy; they also showed lower anxiety scores. Other potential benefits seen were a reduction in diastolic blood pressure and shortened labour. The participants in the review used different methods of applying essential oils, including using essential oil in a warm footbath.

Another British study of 8000 women giving birth using aromatherapy showed that 50 per cent of the mothers found the use of essential oil during labour to be helpful. Participants rated rose and peppermint oil to be most useful.

According to Mem Davis, a naturopath and doula, essential oils used during labour should be based on personal preferences. "During labour, a woman's sense of smell is altered and is often far more sensitive; she may dislike the smell of some oils that she would usually tolerate."

Essential oils are deeply connected to our memories. "Few things move us so profoundly as the sense of smell and the memories and emotions it evokes," says Princi-Jones. These memories can be either positive or negative, and using certain oils during labour can trigger emotional memories connected to the scent of the oil, thus intensifying the experience of birth. That's why experts recommend testing essential oils before using for labour.

Davis uses a small selection of oils for her clients during the last trimester and for birth for safety reasons. "I use clary sage for massaging around the feet and ankles, particularly during the last couple of weeks when there are signs of pre-labour," she says. "During labour, I keep lavender handy for a calm environment, citrus or jasmine for boosting mood and energy, and peppermint for nausea." She also recommends using