

Aromatherapy and childbirth

In 1999 a seminal report carried out by midwives, Burns, Blamey et al, was published, detailing the use of aromatherapy in midwifery practice in a large teaching unit in Oxford. Carried out over eight years, the study involved 8058 mothers in childbirth and included a wide range of situations from low risk, spontaneous labour and birth, to induced labour, assisted delivery and Caesarean section. Ten essential oils, diluted in a carrier oil where appropriate, were used in the study, administered via skin absorption and/or inhalation.

The study found conclusively that aromatherapy could positively support women during childbirth by reducing maternal anxiety, fear and/or pain during labour, alleviating vomiting and/or nausea, assisting contractions and enhancing maternal wellbeing during labour.

Both mothers and midwives consistently rated aromatherapy very positively and during the eight years of the study the use of systemic pain relief fell within the study centre from 6% to 0.4% (per woman). Only 1% of women reported any associated symptom, all mild in nature.

This extensive report has since formed the basis for further research and the widespread use of essential oils in maternity units, where it is now the norm for midwives to welcome oils brought in by labouring mothers.

SO, what to use, how and when?

Firstly, oils to calm and ease pain. Clary Sage and Roman Chamomile, both deeply relaxing, were found by the study to alleviate pain during contractions. Lavender is another very relaxing and relieving oil used alone and can be even more effective if combined with Chamomile.

Clary Sage also helps stimulate contractions if they slow down or stop during labour (see below).

For both mother and birth partner, fear and anxiety can, often quite reasonably, arise at any stage during the birth process. Here Frankincense has a profoundly calming and reassuring effect on the nervous system, slowing and deepening the breath, relaxing yet revitalizing.

Other excellent choices include Geranium, balancing on every level including emotional and hormonal; Rose, the ultimately feminine oil; Vetiver which promotes relaxation and sleep, useful either during a long slow labour or to switch off and sleep after the birth. If you have a cold, inhale Eucalyptus to help ease congestion.

Should you begin to flag try Grapefruit or Lemon, to uplift, refresh and revive. These cheerful citrus oils would also be very helpful should vomiting occur, as would Spearmint which will help ease nausea and freshen the senses, if there is vomiting.

With the exception of Clary Sage, try these oils over the weeks beforehand to find personal favorites, but be prepared that choices may change inexplicably during labour! Clary shouldn't be used beforehand; its ability to stimulate contractions makes it inappropriate before labour begins but please don't try to use it to induce an overdue labour – it just doesn't seem to work like that!!

A lovely use of aromatherapy is to burn Lavender while resting and relaxing during pregnancy. Your unborn baby will be aware of the oil and associate the smell with calmness. By association, the same oil used during labour may help reassure the baby and keep everyone more relaxed. Later, burning Lavender in an electric oil burner in baby's bedroom at night may help your baby sleep well. Your favorite relaxing music could be used alongside to create a complete 'package of peace'!

During labour the principle ways to use oils are by skin application and inhalation. Inhaling oils directly and rapidly affects brain processes. One or two drops of oil on a tissue or cotton wool ball are inhaled, the simplicity of this method being that the tissue can be discarded quickly, or the oil renewed, as required. If suddenly that oil isn't the 'right' one it can be thrown away and something else, or nothing else, used instead.

At home an oil burner, with 2-4 drops of essential oil, can be used to introduce oils into the air, while in hospital a bowl of water as hot as you can get it would be a good substitute, the drops of oil added to the water. It is best to use either a burner or the hot water method for no more than 15 minutes per hour to avoid over exposure for everyone present.

A cool Lavender compress, using an ordinary face flannel, can be very reviving for a tired mother. Add a drop of lavender oil to a small bowl of cold water, immerse the flannel and wring it out, keeping it folded to retain both the coolness and oil. This can then be used as a face compress, especially refreshing when applied to the forehead. Similarly, using warm water and one or two drops of Clary Sage, a compress applied to the abdomen and/or lower back can be very pain relieving and may help stimulate contractions that have slowed or stopped. Use a separate flannel for each oil.

For a bath during labour, add 4-5 drops of essential oil to a tablespoon of full fat milk then stir it into the bath. Milk provides a suitable dispersant for oils in the water, avoiding any possibility of skin reactions caused by the oils, especially at this crucial time. If planning a water birth, do resist adding oils directly to the birthing pool; a water birth may not be possible if oil is in the water.

Commercially produced massage oils for labour or a blend individually designed by your aromatherapist can be used for massage, a lovely way for the birth partner to assist the mother. Alternatively a couple of drops of any essential oil listed above, diluted in base oil, can be used.

Finally be guided by the midwife, who will probably be very supportive of your use of aromatherapy. If there is need for any drug intervention it would be advisable to stop using essential oils to allow the midwife to monitor the effects of the drugs, if only short term.

Whatever you choose to use during labour, enjoy good quality oils in the knowledge that you will all benefit from them!

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