

Pregnancy and Thai Massage

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Studies have shown that general massage therapy carried out during pregnancy can help to reduce stress, alleviate depression, relieve general aches and pains, improve the potential for successful delivery, and promote good health for the child. It has also been proven that with regular massage treatment, hormones such as norepinephrine and cortisol (“stress hormones”) are reduced. In addition, neurotransmitters such as dopamine and serotonin, which are associated with depression when they exist in low levels, are increased. Other beneficial effects of prenatal massage include reduced back pain, improved blood circulation, headache relief, and deeper sleep.

After the first trimester, pregnant women shouldn’t lie on their back for extended periods, and for obvious reasons they shouldn’t lie on their stomachs, either. Because of this, traditional Thai massage is better suited for pregnancy than Western table massage, since an entire treatment can be carried out with the client in side-lying and seated positions, while resting on a comfortable floor mat.

Pregnancy massage in Thailand

In Thailand, herbal compresses (*luk pra kob*) are used extensively when working with pregnant women. Deep stretches and focused point and line work are generally not performed. Instead, broad pressure is applied to safe areas of the body using the compresses as extensions of the hands. Experienced healers create herbal blends for prepartum work, and herbal teas and decoctions may

also be offered to ease pain, aid in relaxation, and help bring about a smooth delivery.

Session time is kept short, usually about one hour, and massage is generally not performed in the first few months of pregnancy. After the baby is delivered, special postpartum herbal compresses may be used to minimize scars, to help the uterus contract, to draw out excess fluids from the mother's body, and to relieve swollen breasts.

Allaying fears and concerns

Although pregnancy treatments in Thailand utilize herbal compresses extensively, many programs of study in the West do not adequately prepare Thai therapists in the art of luk pra kob. This is unfortunate, since herbal compresses are an integral part of traditional Thai healing, and they may be used with great success not only with pregnant clients but with all people. If you're not using compresses, however, your pregnant clients can still derive benefit from Thai massage therapy, as long as you're sensitive, practical, and wise in your approach.

I remember how nervous I was the first time I reluctantly agreed to work on a client who had become pregnant. She was someone I had treated before on several occasions, but when I saw her again, she was already three months pregnant, and I was afraid of doing anything that could cause harm to her or to the baby growing inside her. I consulted the only source that was available at the time for pregnancy in Thai massage: a few guidelines in my teacher Asokananda's advanced book. I corresponded with him by e-mail to make sure I knew which techniques to avoid in my work, and I did research about pregnancy, so I could be as ready as possible for the first session with my client. I had my notes right next to me as I worked. I was so worried and careful during that first session. My pressure and stretching was much lighter than usual, and instead of avoiding only the contraindicated points on feet, ankles, and hands, I don't think I touched her feet or hands during the entire session!

Now, after many years of experience, I am comfortable (and quite excited) when I have the opportunity to work with a pregnant woman in Thai massage. I've worked with some clients throughout their entire pregnancy; from immediately after conception to just a few days before delivery. I consider it a great blessing to be part of two persons' lives at the same time. My sessions with pregnant clients have also proven to be fabulous learning opportunities for me as a therapist, and they have provided me with an enhanced sense of self. When I occasionally have the opportunity to meet a child who was once in her mother's belly on my mat, I feel an immediate connection to that child in a deep, spiritual way.

Precautions, preparations, and tools

Thai massage is absolutely wonderful in pregnancy. An experienced practitioner can resort to many Thai techniques in modified body positions in order to provide a relaxing and balancing full-body treatment for a pregnant woman. Here are some tips and suggestions that may help you to gain the confidence and skills necessary to work with pregnant women:

- Avoid deep point pressure and deep *sen* line work. Instead, work with broad, medium-light pressure, and avoid deep, prolonged stretches. The hormone relaxin exists in highly elevated levels in pregnant women, resulting in pelvic and cervical expansion and a general relaxed state. Because of this, an inexperienced or insensitive therapist can easily overstretch a client, thereby increasing risk to the mother and child.
- Don't practice massage on a pregnant woman until you know the things you shouldn't do. Consider practicing first on non-pregnant friends or colleagues. Do this by running through your normal sequence of Thai massage techniques while eliminating those postures, techniques, pressure points, and stretches that should be avoided for pregnant women. Refine and practice as many side-position techniques as you can, since in mid-to late-term pregnancy, that's the body position you will be using most. In addition to practicing specific techniques on friends, you can also use them in your work with your regular clients, and they won't ever know that you are pretending they are pregnant.
- You will need large pillows and bolsters when you work with pregnant women, so if you don't already have them in your place of practice, buy some. I've found that sofa seat cushions, sofa backrest pillows, and large bolsters work very well. Since you'll be working most of the time with the client in side position, it's best to have a firm and long pillow to use for her head. Normal-sized bed pillows don't work as well. A tubular pillow is also a good tool, since you can use it as a support for your client's top arm when she is in side position.
- Have some large-size loose cotton pants available for clients, and remember to keep your room, your client, and the mat at a comfortable temperature.
- Avoid sensitive pressure points entirely, especially those on hands, wrists, feet, and ankles. Keep reference notes nearby (such as the "Danger Zones" section of this article), so you can remind yourself of specific things you should avoid during a session.
- Always err on the side of caution. Check with your client from time to time to make sure your pressure is not too strong, and that she is comfortable.

How to position the client

As mentioned earlier, Thai massage is especially suited to pregnant women because an entire treatment may be carried out in seated, reclining supine, and side positions. During the first few months of pregnancy, most women can lie comfortably on their backs for short periods of time. Since Thai massage treatments are normally begun by working the feet and legs in supine position, you may continue to do so with pregnant women, at least for the first trimester.



Reclining supine position

But be aware of the clock as you work, and try to not let your client stay in supine position for longer than the first 15 minutes of the session. Remember that you can work the inside and outside legs quite efficiently in side-lying position using compresses, palming, and thumbing, so there is no need to work these areas with the client in supine position. As the pregnancy progresses into the second trimester, avoid keeping the client on her back altogether. Instead, work almost entirely in side position,

though, if you wish, you may begin and end the session in reclining supine position.

Reclining supine position

To position a client in reclining supine position, create a firm but pliant back support with large pillows and bolsters such as those used for sofas, daybeds, and other furniture. Make sure there is enough support at the bottom of the stack of pillows, so the foundation doesn't slide. If you are working on a large mat, this will be easier to do. If you are working on a small mat, you may have to place a rug or carpet behind the mat, so the bottom pillows don't slide away when the client leans backward. After you help your client lean back against the pillow support, ask her if she is at a comfortable angle. If she needs to move forward or backward, adjust the pillows until she feels comfortable. You might decide to place an additional pillow behind her head.

When you begin a session in reclining supine position, you won't need a pillow under her knees. But if you end the session in this position, in order to work her face and head, place a tubular pillow or a large rolled towel under her knees for added comfort. If you don't wish to end the session in reclining

supine position, you may bring her to a complete seated position, but don't do so in the traditional Thai way of crossing her legs and pulling her up by her arms! That would compress her belly. Instead, gently ask your client to come to a seated position, as you help to push her forward from behind.

Side position

After the initial work in reclining supine position, bring your client into the normal side-lying Thai position. Place one leg over the other, drape one arm over the other, and position her head on a high, firm pillow. I like to use a tubular pillow in front of the chest so the upper arm can drape comfortably. Don't push the tubular pillow too firmly into her stomach, and try to keep her top leg bent at approximately a 90-degree angle.

Now you can begin your leg work. Butterfly-press, palm-press, thumb-walk, and work the points on the female-dominant (left) leg first, and then work on her sub-dominant leg. In the side position photo above, for example, you could first work on the medial (inside) aspect of the left leg, then proceed to the lateral (outer) aspect of her right leg. When she is flipped onto her other side, you would work the opposite sides of each leg, starting first with the dominant leg.



Side position

Suggested body positioning sequences

For the first trimester, you and your client may be comfortable starting in regular supine position for the first 15 minutes of the session. Work with compresses, or use traditional Thai techniques, as you work the feet, ankles, calves, and legs. Then bring your client into side position and continue working the top lateral leg and the bottom medial leg. Continue with the hips, sacrum, back, shoulder, and neck. Flip the client to her other side and repeat the sequence. Now, if you wish, you may bring the client into regular seated position and work from behind on her neck, shoulders, face, and head. You can end in seated position, or you can ease her downward to supine position.

After three months of pregnancy, it's best to avoid full supine position, and to use reclining supine position for the beginning of the session. Follow the

pattern above in side position, and finish in either seated position or in reclining supine position.

In the last few months of pregnancy, take extra care to not prolong your work in seated or reclining supine position, and work as much as possible, if not entirely, in side position. This is when you can begin to work the entire (top) side of her body from foot to neck, and the medial aspect of the leg and arm that is resting on the mat. Then you may flip her to the other side and repeat the process. Finish in reclining supine or seated position, or just let her remain on the mat in side position, if you prefer.

The importance of working the back

As a baby develops, and as the abdominal wall expands and becomes heavier, a woman's back muscles need to work harder to support anterior weight displacement and to maintain good posture. In the second trimester, back strain may begin, and in the last few months of pregnancy it can become extreme. The added weight can also sometimes have a negative effect on the shoulders and neck.

Fortunately, working in side position allows full access to the sacrum, the lower back, the major sets of back lines, the scapulae, and the shoulders and neck. After you've finished working on the client's legs in side position, you can work the upper hip with gentle leg rotations, gentle backward leg bends (be careful), and light pressure to the boomerang points at the hip. When you return the upper leg to a 90-degree resting position, you can then work on the back.

I spend a lot of time gently working the client's back with my feet. Foot walking provides broad pressure and is a great way to gently open up and relax the entire back. Spend as much time as you like working with your feet on her back. Try to find areas where you can feel the tension, and gently sink your foot in until you feel a slight resistance. Then stay there for 10–20 seconds, at least through one inhale and two exhales. If your client needs more pressure there, you will feel her surrender more space for you to press deeper.

I remember one session with a regular client who was in her last stages of pregnancy. She loved it when I worked with my feet on her back, but one day she asked me to go deeper, and I obliged. Then as she exhaled she asked me to go deeper again. I complied, but I began to worry that I was getting dangerously close to her belly, and therefore close to the baby. I told her I didn't think I should go any deeper. She replied: "You have no idea how much pain I have down there carrying this baby. I can't wait for this baby to be out of me! I need more pressure. Now push harder. I said push harder!"

As a result of that dramatic and comical experience, I learned how important it is to work on the backs of pregnant women. And in my opin-

ion, using foot-presses, rather than palm-presses, is the best way to do this. Spend as much time as you like applying broad and gradually deepening foot pressure. Work only one side of the back for each side-lying position. In other words, if the client is lying on their left side, work the lower (left) side of their back. The posterior portion of your heel will be sliding on the mat, your upper heel and arch will be making most contact with her back, and the upper arch and toes of your foot will surround and cup the spine as you push forward.

Work with your outside foot first (the foot that is closest to her legs), and then gradually introduce your other foot as you begin to pedal against her back with rocking pressure, alternating from one foot to the other. As the back begins to open and relax, it will become more flexible. Then you can do some of the classic Thai techniques, such as gently pulling her leg slightly backward as you anchor your foot against her back. Remember: be gentle, and never strain or overextend your client.

After a while, you can reach over and grab her uppermost arm and bring it backward toward you. Hold each other's wrists, hold her foot in your other hand, and gently begin to pedal first with one foot, then another, in alternating fashion. Make sure to open the arc of her outstretched arm and leg as wide as possible. Don't pull back on the arm and foot. Just hold them aloft as you gently pedal with your feet. Be careful to always work sensitively, and check with your client to make sure she is comfortable and that she is enjoying the work.

Use common sense. Be attentive to your client's signals, work gently and compassionately, and help her to relieve the back stress she is enduring as a result of the extra weight in her belly. Your client will be grateful for all the attention you are giving to her back.

Working the stomach, face, and head

Although you should take care not to press on the stomach at any time, your client may appreciate a soft and gentle belly massage. It's best to ask the client's permission before you touch her stomach. If you have her permission, you can begin in clockwise fashion making a contiguous series of small palm circles. You can also move from one circle to the other by working in a figure eight pattern. If you and your client feel comfortable with gentle compressions, you may do so while following the outside contour of the amniotic sac. If this is the case, cradle the sac with your palms and press it very gently toward her navel, but never press directly downward into the mat.

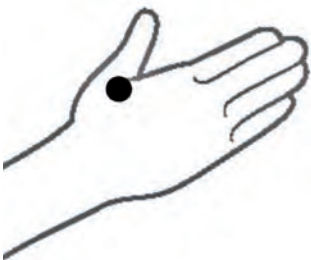
Working with a luk pra kob compress can be very soothing to a pregnant mother, and it's nice to imagine that the warming effect and medicinal herbs have a positive effect on the baby, too. You can apply extremely gentle pressure

with a warm compress on the entire belly, as well as on the chest, shoulders, neck, head, and face.

Working the face and head are not very convenient from side-lying position. Besides, it is nice to work the entire face and head at the same time, as a finishing touch of the massage. Because of this, consider kneeling behind your client and working her face and head while she's in reclining supine or seated position. Modify your kneeling or half-kneeling position so that you have best access to the portions of her face and head that need your attention.

Danger zones: Pressure points, areas, and techniques to avoid

- X[Ⓢ] Any type of spinal twist is prohibited for pregnant women. Compression of the belly during pregnancy, whether in side position or in reclining seated position, is forbidden. Avoid “chopping” or any type of percussive technique on the back, chest, or belly.
- X[Ⓢ] Avoid all “blood stop” techniques (*bpert lom*). Never perform extended compressions on femoral or axillary arteries.
- X[Ⓢ] Ordinary deep Thai stomach massage is forbidden during pregnancy. Never use palm presses, butterfly presses, elbows, or forearms to work the stomach, and never work stomach pressure points with your fingers. If you wish to make contact with your client's stomach, follow the guidelines previously mentioned in this essay.
- X[Ⓢ] Avoid pressing the point at the outside (lateral) ankle, and the two corresponding anatomical points on the inside (medial) ankle. It is best to avoid giving deep acupressure altogether on the lateral and medial ankles, since stimulation of these areas is believed in some traditions to induce labor. Gentle thumb circles on the top and bottom foot lines, as well as ankle rotations, twists, and pulls are fine.
- X[Ⓢ] In addition to dangerous ankle-pressure points, the wrists also contain powerful points that are believed to stimulate pelvic muscles, including the uterus. Because of this, and to be safe, avoid working the pressure points on the wrists. As with the feet, working the finger lines with thumb circles, as well as rotations, pulls, finger bends, and finger cracks, is fine.
- X[Ⓢ] Avoid pressing the point between the web of the thumb and first finger of each hand. This point is called *hegu* in Chinese acupressure. Pressing this point under normal circumstances eliminates or reduces pain, including headache, but this point should be avoided for women in any stage of pregnancy.



Final suggestions

The following suggestions may also be helpful:

- Pregnant women often feel warm, so be careful to not overheat your room.
- Pregnant women can easily become dizzy or feel faint. Having a quick source of sugar nearby, such as juice, may be a good idea.
- If your client has nausea or morning sickness, it is best to minimize rocking motions as you work.

I hope these guidelines and suggestions will be helpful for Thai therapists working with pregnant women. It's natural to be nervous the first few times you work with a pregnant client. Just remember to use common sense, to maintain your focus, to maximize your sensitivity, and to study and research the points, techniques and stretches you should always avoid. Practice safely and compassionately, and your pregnant client (and her baby) will be grateful.