

# Thai Massage for Pregnancy ~ Bob Haddad, RTT

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, hormones 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.

## 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 women, but with all people. If you are not using compresses, however, your pregnant clients can still derive benefit from Thai massage therapy, as long as you are sensitive, practical and wise in your approach.

I remember how nervous I was the first time I reluctantly accepted to work on a client that had become pregnant. She was someone I had treated before on several occasions, but I hadn't been working with her immediately prior to her conception. 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 - and I corresponded with him by email to make sure I knew which techniques to avoid in my work. I also 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 remember how worried and careful I was that during that first session. My pressure and stretching was much lighter than usual, and instead of avoiding only the contra-indicated 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 through their entire pregnancy; from immediately after conception to just a few days before delivery. I consider it a great blessing to be a part of two person's lives at the very 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 that was once in her mother's belly on my mat, I feel an immediate connection to that child in a deep, spiritual way.

## 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 non-dangerous areas using the compresses as extensions of the hands. Experienced healers create

herbal blends for pre-partum work, diet is adjusted, 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 post-partum 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.

Post-partum practices include a period of rest called *yuu fai*. This is a time where a new mother is kept near a fire, in warm place, and catered to with massage, proper diet and herbal medicine. Herbal sauna or steam baths are administered, and hot herbal compresses are applied to the body and especially the stomach and groin area. In cases of over-expanded uterine muscles, or in rare cases of uterine prolapse, traditional doctors use massage techniques and may apply poultices of herbs to encourage shrinking of the tissues.

## **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 to 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, gentle pressure. Work with medium-light pressure, and don't perform deep stretches of any kind. 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.
- Always work slowly and gently. Take care to provide a balanced treatment on both sides of the body. Don't use quick or sharp movements. Use soft or medium pressure. Don't work too deeply.
- Don't practice massage on a pregnant woman until you know the things you should not do. Consider practicing first on non-pregnant friends or colleagues. Do this by running through your normal sequence of Thai massage while eliminating those postures, techniques, pressure points and stretches that should be avoided for pregnant women. You can even do this type of mental preparation as you work with your regular clients, and they won't ever know that you are pretending that 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 have found that sofa seat cushions, sofa backrest pillows and large bolsters work very well. Since you will be working most of the time with the client in side position, it is 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 notes nearby (such as the "Danger Zones" section of this article), so you can remind yourself of specific things you should avoid during the 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** 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. 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. As the pregnancy progresses into the second trimester, avoid keeping the client on her back altogether. Instead, you should 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 furnishings. 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 add a rug or a carpet behind the mat so the bottom pillows do not 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. 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 come to a seated position while you help from behind to push her forward.



*Reclining supine position*



**Side position** To position a client in side position, bring her into the normal side lying Thai position, with one leg over the other, with one arm draped over the other, and with her head on a high, firm pillow. It's a good idea to use a tubular pillow in front of the chest so the upper arm can drape comfortably. Do not push the tubular pillow too firmly into her stomach, and try to keep her top leg bent at approximately a 90 degree angle. After the initial work in reclining supine position, bring your client into side position. 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 aspect of the left leg, and then proceed to the lateral 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.

## Comfort and support in side position

- \* Use a firm and long pillow for head
- \* Use a roll or another pillow for upper arm support
- \* Have available an optional bolster to elevate client's top bent leg
- \* Remember to use the correct leg and foot position
- \* Cover the body whenever possible



## 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 3 months of pregnancy, it's best to avoid full supine position, and begin to use reclining supine position for the beginning of the session. Follow the pattern above in side position, and then either finish in seated 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 leave her on the mat in side position if you prefer.

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



☠ Any type of deep spinal twist should be avoided for pregnant women. Compression of the belly during pregnancy, whether in side position or in reclining seated position is forbidden. Avoid traditional Thai “chopping” or any type of percussive technique on the back or on the belly.



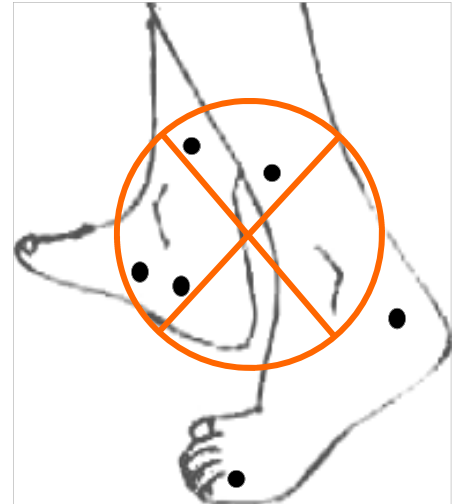
☠ Avoid all “blood stop” techniques (*bpert lom*). Never perform extended compressions on femoral or axillary arteries.



⊗ Traditional 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 mentioned previously.

⊗ Avoid pressing the point at the outside (lateral) ankle, and the two corresponding anatomical points on the inside (medial) ankle. Also avoid deep acupressure on the lower medial and lateral legs, especially at the points in the illustration. It is believed that stimulation of these areas may induce labor.

To always be on the safe side when working with pregnant women, avoid giving deep acupressure altogether on the legs, ankles and feet. Gentle thumb circles on the top and bottom foot lines, as well as ankle rotations, twists, pulls and squeezing the feet are fine. In Thailand, balms and lotions are often used to work the feet.



⊗ Avoid pressing the point between the web of the thumb and first finger of each hand. In acupuncture, this point is called *hegu*. Pressing this point under normal circumstances eliminates or reduces pain, including headache, but many traditional medicine systems advise against stimulation of this point for women at any stage of pregnancy.

⊗ The wrist contains powerful pressure points which 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 and gentle pressure, as well as rotations, pulls, and finger cracks, are fine.





**Other suggestions** Pregnant woman sometimes feel warm, so be aware to not overheat your room. If your client has been experiencing nausea or morning sickness around the same time as the Thai treatment, it's best to minimize rocking motions as you work. Instead, apply grounded pressure and release slowly. Pregnant woman can easily become dizzy or feel faint. Having a quick source of sugar nearby, such as juice or a ginger candy, may be a good idea. Generally speaking, ginger is a natural remedy to keep morning sickness at a minimum, and it works well as an antacid. You may also serve your client some hot ginger tea before or after the treatment. Ginger is also an anti-inflammatory, so herbal compress recipes may be adjusted to contain more ginger than usual.

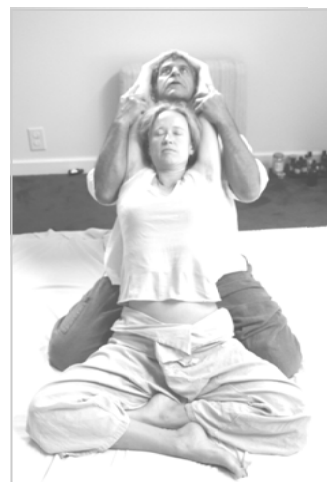
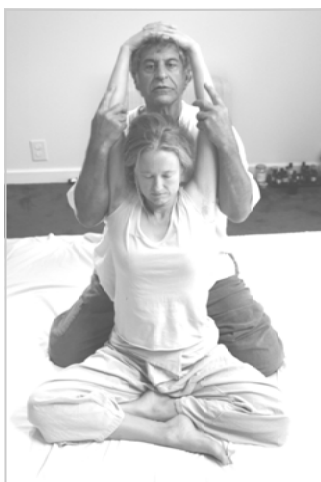
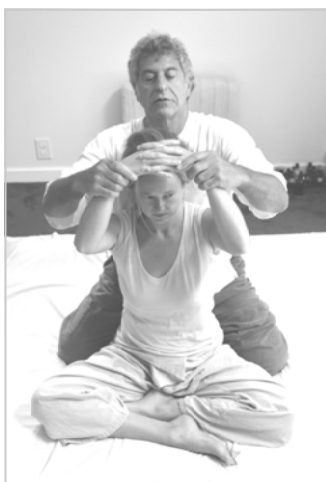
### A few helpful techniques

#### Supported upper back & arm stretch *(squatting and standing variations)*

Bring client's arms toward her head and ask her to interlace her fingers. \* Now take hold of the arms near the elbows, and bring her hands to rest comfortably on your head

\* On a mutual exhale, lean backward, keeping your back straight. \* Wait for an inhale, and on the next exhale, lean back further, for a deeper stretch.

\* On a mutual inhale, return to the starting position, shake open her hands, and let her arms drop to the mat.



**Side stretch** You may do this stretch in side position, but take care to not to press the body downward into the mat, which would put pressure on the belly. To keep the client from sliding downward, lock the back of your heel against the top of her ankle.



**Hip opening** Move very slowly, and maintain your balance. Bring client's arm around your waist to slightly deepen the stretch. *Teacher will show variations*