Reflexology in pregnancy

By Jeanette Barsalini

Are you feeling tired, uncomfortable or nauseous in your pregnancy? You may be surprised to know that an ancient form of healing called reflexology can help treat many common pregnancy ailments and may even help you during labour and after your baby is born.

What is reflexology?

Reflexology has been around for over 4000 years and was originally practised by the ancient Egyptians and Chinese. However, it was first recognised in the Western world in 1913 when an American doctor, Dr William Fitzgerald, noticed that pressure on specific parts of the body could have an anaesthetising effect on areas in the same ‘zone’ of the body. This idea of zone therapy was further developed in the 1930s by Eunice Ingham, who defined reflexology as it is practised today.

By applying pressure to specific points on the feet (called reflexes), a professionally trained reflexologist can detect subtle imbalances, release blockages and restore the flow of energy within the body. The theory is that the feet are like mirror-images of the rest of the body and that applying pressure to these reflex points can bring about a positive effect in the corresponding part of the body, encouraging it to repair and heal itself. Reflexology is known to be one of the most relaxing of the complementary therapies and a one hour treatment will typically leave you feeling relaxed and refreshed and more likely to have a good night’s sleep.

Is it safe in pregnancy?

Obviously when you are pregnant you want to make sure that everything you do is safe for both you and your baby. Reflexology is generally considered safe throughout pregnancy, provided there are no complications and your reflexologist knows that you’re pregnant. There is a misconception that reflexology can increase the risk of a miscarriage during the early stages of pregnancy although the Association of Reflexologists says: “There is no evidence to even suggest that this may be the case. However, as miscarriages are more common in the first term of pregnancy, some reflexologists are not prepared to take the risk that the client may blame them should a miscarriage occur.” A miscarriage is generally a sign that there has been a problem with the baby’s development or the mother’s health and cannot be caused by a reflexology treatment. However, because this is a slightly grey area, some women choose to wait until after their 12 week scan before commencing a course of reflexology treatments, especially if they have not had reflexology before. On the other hand, women who have been using reflexology to help them conceive tend to carry on with their reflexology treatments during their first trimester.

When should it be avoided?

Although there are very few contraindications to reflexology, it should always be undertaken by a qualified reflexologist and preferably one who has experience of treating women during pregnancy. There are some conditions where it should be avoided altogether and these include:

- Pre-term labour - at any time before 37 weeks
- Placenta previa - if Grade II or III after 32 weeks
- Hydroamnios - if there is too much amniotic fluid around the baby after 32 weeks.

Suzanne Ezner, a midwife and reflexologist, advises women with an increased risk of deep vein thrombosis (DVT) or pre-eclampsia to seek medical advice before having reflexology. She also
suggests that in cases where the mother-to-be is diabetic she should check her blood sugar before and after treatments, as reflexology helps to balance the endocrine system and insulin production.

**How can reflexology help during pregnancy?**

During pregnancy, your body goes through significant changes, all of which affect the emotional, hormonal and physiological balance of the body. Reflexology helps restore the body's equilibrium and may help alleviate or prevent discomfort arising from these changes. Specifically, it has been shown to help with the following:

- General relaxation and relief of stress and anxiety
- Increased energy levels
- Indigestion and heartburn
- Backache and sciatic pain
- Nausea and vomiting
- Fluid retention (eg in feet and ankles)
- Ligament and groin pain
- Constipation
- Insomnia and sleep problems.

Research in the UK and Denmark has shown that women receiving regular reflexology treatments throughout their pregnancy tend to deliver closer to their due date, experience shorter labours and need less pain relief than women who have not had regular reflexology.

**Can reflexology induce labour?**

Having reflexology in the final stages of pregnancy helps the body enter a deep state of relaxation and this can sometimes result in the spontaneous onset of labour, preventing the need for medical intervention. One or two reflexology treatments at or around the 40 week stage will also leave your body balanced and rested and in optimal condition to give birth. Once you are past your due date, your reflexologist may use specific ‘labour induction’ techniques to help stimulate the hormone oxytocin which is involved in uterine contractions and breast milk supply.

**Post pregnancy**

Once your baby is born, your hormones take a nose-dive and this sudden drop can have a major effect on your emotions at the same time as you are having to deal with lack of sleep and feeding and caring for a newborn. Reflexology can help ease anxiety and may also help with other post-natal problems such as:

- Low milk supply
- Engorged breasts
- Urine retention
- Constipation
- Backache
- Sleep problems
- Post-natal depression
- Helping your menstrual cycle return to normal.
Finding a reflexologist

Reflexology is gradually becoming more widely accepted by NHS GPs and midwives with many now endorsing its use during pregnancy and labour. A few NHS hospitals now even have their own reflexologists working within the maternity unit. However, until reflexology becomes widely available under the NHS, most patients continue to consult a reflexologist privately. To ensure your reflexologist is properly qualified and experienced, you should check that they are a member of an appropriate professional body. The Association of Reflexologists (www.aor.org.uk) publishes a referral register of qualified reflexologists and can help you find a practitioner in your area.

Jeanette Barsalini is a qualified reflexologist and member of the Association of Reflexologists.