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**Aromatherapy for
labour and childbirth**



Patient information

Aromatherapy for labour and childbirth



Excellent patient care, together

This information leaflet outlines the benefits and risks of the use of essential oils and aromatherapy during labour and birth and into the postnatal period.

Aromatherapy is used nationally as a complementary therapy. This is a service which is offered to women who choose their maternity care within West Hertfordshire Teaching Hospital for women in labour. Studies have shown that women in labour consistently praise the use of aromatherapy and have found that it aids relaxation, reduces stress and raises energy levels. It is also effective in relieving symptoms such as anxiety, nausea and pain. Aromatherapy may also be helpful to relieve common discomforts within the postnatal period.

It is essential that you seek advice from your midwife regarding the oils which are right for you. There is evidence to suggest that some essential oils are not advisable in relation to certain medical and pregnancy history and in some cases, it is advisable for essential oils not to be used at all, but advice will be given in accordance with local guidelines for the use of aromatherapy. The oils chosen for use within West Hertfordshire have all been chosen specifically with labour and birth in mind.

What is Aromatherapy?

Aromatherapy is the use of essential oils extracted from natural sources (plants and flowers) which can help to improve wellbeing for the mind and body.

- Oils can enter the body through the skin and olfactory system (sense of smell), it can be administered by a variety of methods.
- Essential oils work by stimulating the olfactory (smell) senses which release endorphins (the body's natural pain relief) via the central nervous system and can reduce pain by producing pleasant, relaxing feelings, to uplift emotional state and produce euphoric sensations.
- Aromatherapy can support the natural birth process and can promote emotional and physical health.

How are the essential oils administered?

- Inhalation via diffuser which diffuse the essential oils into the air which allow you to inhale the vapours into your body. Essential oil can also be inhaled using fans, snippy pots. A few drops of essential oils on a tissue or cotton wool swab can also be an effective form of inhalation therapy.
- Massage oil particles are small enough to be absorbed by the skin. Massage therapy can assist in the absorption of the oils by increasing the blood flow. Touch is also effective in reducing pain and is very relaxing.
- The oils are mixed with organic sunflower oil as a carrier, as oils should not be applied neat on the skin.
- Compress Essential oils are added to water and direct contact can be soothing to the body. Warm or cold compresses can be used.

Which oils can be used?

5 essential oils have been selected by West Hertfordshire; they have been specially selected due to their safety for use and therapeutic properties.

Clary sage - Encourages contractions. Euphoric sedative. Pain relief.

Frankincense - Eases sudden onset anxiety, panic and fear.

Lavender - Calming, balancing, sedating, relaxing, pain relieving. Antibacterial and antimicrobial.

Spearmint - Eases nausea and headaches. Stimulates the mind, eliminates fatigue and encourages contractions.

Mandarin - Anti-anxiety, may aid constipation and flatulence, may reduce muscle spasm, has antiemetic properties. May promote a feeling of calm and sleep. Aids stress management and skin healing.

All the above oils are available within the hospital. They can be administered by a midwife who has undertaken aromatherapy training and who is aware of your medical and pregnancy history.

Please note we can only administer oils provided by the hospital. Oils brought in from home can be used personally but cannot be administered by the midwife.

When can aromatherapy be used?

- In early stages of labour for problems such as anxiety, stress and fear. Tiredness can be a major factor in early labour, therefore some of the more uplifting oils can be used to relieve this.
- Established labour - As labour progresses pain relieving oils can be administered to help with this. This is also a way of your birthing partner becoming more involved in the labour process and working together promotes empowerment for you both. Massage and touch can be extremely beneficial in labour and birth.
- Postnatal period - Essential oils can help promote wound healing and support milk production for breastfeeding mothers.
- Side effects from a large study of 8,000 women undertaken at the John Radcliffe hospital it was reported that only a small proportion (1%) of mothers had any side effects from using aromatherapy. These side effects included nausea, vomiting, headaches and allergic responses.
- When providing care for women in labour using aromatherapy, the oils can sometimes affect others present. If your birth partner(s) suffers from illnesses such as epilepsy, asthma, cardiac problems, high or low blood pressure, is pregnant or breastfeeding then please inform your midwife caring for you so that your oils can be adapted accordingly.

For further information please contact Alexandra Birth Centre 01923 217364

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