

healing hands

The benefits of osteopathy for pre-conception and pregnancy are not widely known. Osteopath Sarah-Jane Attias, newest recruit to the OHbaby! team of experts, explains how she and her colleagues can help.

Every week we get several calls to our clinic asking "What is osteopathy?". So I'd like to start with a general overview of the philosophy and treatments osteopathy offers. Of particular interest to OHbaby! readers would be the recognition and high success rate osteopathy achieves when applied to pre-conception, pregnancy and post-natal care of mum, baby and their extended family.

what is osteopathy?

Osteopathy offers a safe, gentle and effective approach, using hands-on techniques, to diagnose and treat a wide range of health problems. Osteopaths are highly trained and have a deep understanding of physiology and anatomy. They are skilled in cranial and structural alignments that balance and reactivate your body for optimum function and long-term health.

Osteopathy gives emphasis to the interrelationship of the body's structure: muscles, bones, joints and nerves, and optimising their function, as well as the interplay of breathing, circulation, digestion and metabolism, to name a few. Osteopaths take a thorough case history and carry out physical examinations, including any necessary medical tests. Your osteopath may use orthopaedic, neurological and other system examinations to assess and diagnose you, and if necessary, refer to other healthcare providers as required. We review your medical history, occupation, exercise regime, and any other factors which may be affecting your overall wellbeing – every detail is taken into consideration. Osteopaths are primary healthcare providers and therefore ACC registered.

osteopathy and fertility

I liken pre-conception care to the analogy of planting two seeds. One seed gets planted in rich, nutrient-dense soil, with moisture, warmth and light. The other seed gets popped into a pot of dirt and watered. We all know which seed has the best chance of thriving!

Once you – a mother-to-be – are focussed on becoming pregnant, it is like opening a floodgate. There is so much going on inside your body and mind; you are in a joyful state and highly sensitised. Physically, hormones are surging, your biological clock is ticking and your focus is set. This physical and emotional mix needs to be balanced into your everyday life and work. It's important to find the space to 'be' – be ready to conceive, that is.

To help maintain and build visceral and muscular integrity, your osteopath can guide you through an exercise and stretching regime which improves blood flow and the fluid dynamics to your whole body. This optimises the ability to produce a viable egg. When your

endometrium is healthy and strong, it creates a deeply nutritious bed for the fertilised egg, thus improving the viability of the pregnancy.

I highly recommend a pre-conception osteopathic check-up to help your body cope with and adapt to the changes of pregnancy. I also treat men in their pre-conception journey, ensuring there is no tension around the pelvis and that their system is synchronised to the conception process. This can be a stressful time for men, with so much emphasis on 'performance'.

not-so-plain sailing

We assume that conception happens easily, but this is not always the case and fertility clinics help many couples to start a family.

I have a strong referral network with fertility specialists, including acupuncturists, naturopaths, nutritionists, and pregnancy yoga and Pilates instructors. I think it is so important that we work together and it is a passion of mine to help couples get a collaborative fertility team on board to support them along their journey.

Personally, I've assisted hundreds of mums and dads seeking physical, emotional and sound medical advice in preparation for getting pregnant – I believe this is our duty as medical practitioners. As osteopaths, we evaluate the total you – top to toe – to ensure there are no pre-existing or underlying restrictions which may reveal themselves later and cause problems while trying to conceive.

osteopathy and pregnancy

Pregnancy is a unique and powerful experience bringing immense physical, hormonal and emotional changes. This can be challenging, but pregnancy can – and should – be enjoyed. Osteopathic treatment can be very helpful throughout pregnancy, for both pain reduction and preparation for labour and delivery.

The rate at which the changes occur within your body is a huge challenge. In a relatively short time, you carry a significant increase in weight – baby, placenta and fluids – putting strain on your body. Hormones cause ligaments to soften, posture changes to accommodate baby, and additional weight puts pressure on joints and muscles. As your body comes under increased physical strain, any past injuries often reveal themselves too. An osteopath can help alleviate these stresses and balance your body's movements. The softening of the ligaments around joints means that old injuries can often be resolved through treatment during pregnancy.

Finding the right osteopath, especially a practitioner who has completed post-graduate studies in pregnancy, babies and children, is important. If you can't find a local osteopath who has these skills, please email me and I would be happy to refer you.

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TREATMENT BY TRIMESTER

FIRST TRIMESTER This is a time when no new forms of vigorous exercise or movement should be introduced. You are in the very early stages of your pregnancy and we need to ensure that your baby is developing well. It is advisable to review your nutrition.

Morning sickness or nausea is a common presentation in the early stages of pregnancy and osteopaths can assist here. I recommend an award-winning therapeutic-grade oil from Absolute Essentials, called Morning Balance; a mix of peppermint and ginger, which has proven to be very helpful for treating morning sickness.

As pregnancy progresses, some mothers have mentioned to me how their bodies don't feel their own any more, that there is a feeling of being 'taken over'. I think it is important to reclaim your body, perhaps attending something like pregnancy yoga. We also offer advice to build a safe programme you can practise at home, stretching and strengthening your body. This will greatly improve drainage, reduce swelling and prepare you for the later stages of pregnancy and the final furlong of labour.

As your baby grows, it becomes more important to use pillows at night to support you and baby. Keep the spine and pelvis neutral, placing the pillow between your knees and lower leg, keeping the top leg in line with the pelvis. Use a smaller pillow or a wedge-shaped cushion to support your baby while you are on your side, gently lifting the belly. In clinic we give you a set of instructions to enable you to manage this at home.

SECOND TRIMESTER This is a crucial point to check in with your osteopath. As your baby is developing and requiring more space, the ribs are flaring at the front, placing strain on their attachments

to your spine. All your organs are pushed up into your diaphragm. Often there is the assumption that your body will stretch all at the same pace, but this is not the case as different parts will release while others are catching up. This means that there is a chance of discomfort. Your osteopath can spot these changes and help you resolve any problems and remain pain-free. Remember, your osteopath is part of your team and their role is to teach and coach you. Also, no two pregnancies are the same. Rest and relaxation are so important – taking the time out to be quiet and still helps with your general state of mind, relaxes your body and aids the calmness of your baby.

THIRD TRIMESTER AND BEYOND

There are a number of factors that will affect pregnant women through these final few months. Some women are still working, some have toddlers, some are juggling both. For parents with other children, there is the added challenge of helping the whole family prepare for the impending new addition. This can be a testing time for toddlers especially, who are trying to get their head around the fact that a brother or sister is on the way. This is where osteopathy can be very beneficial. The whole family can come in for a treatment – they are all in the room at the same time and the toddler is made as much fuss of as the baby in 'mum's tum'. There is a remarkable moment of synchronisation that occurs within the family unit. On those occasions, depending on the size of the family, I will often invite an osteopathic colleague to join me in treating the whole family.

I offer all the mothers I treat during their pregnancy a free wellness check for their newborn. And for mum, I do recommend a post-birth follow-up treatment – it's not called labour for nothing! ●

Sarah-Jane Attias BSc (Hons) Ost. London MONZ is one of the country's most respected practitioners with over 20 years' experience. She believes in providing an integrated treatment approach for the whole family. Sarah-Jane embodies her holistic beliefs in her daily activities, interchanging yoga, Pilates, swimming, tramping and cycling and enjoying a nutrient-rich diet and the odd glass of red wine to powerhouse her way through life.

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