



# AYOT PLACE PRACTICE

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## HERBS AND PREGNANCY

**Preparation for Pregnancy:** Where possible, the process of antenatal care should start before pregnancy. Herbalists think of this as “preparing the ground”. The usual sensible measures of achieving good health need to be adopted such as a good diet, adequate and regular exercise, plenty of fluids, regular bowel movements, fresh air and attention to the mood. Poor diet and stress can interfere with the ability to become pregnant.

To become pregnant is one of the most profound miracles of nature yet remarkably very common! But one should not be overwhelmed by the thought of carrying a new human being within ones body. The “will to life” is very strong and it is important to remember that most women have uneventful pregnancies and give birth to healthy babies. All women have fears about the health of their babies, but the attitude to adopt is that of “loving concern” and not fear. High on your list of priorities is freedom from anxiety and the building of the spiritual bond between you and your baby. Pregnancy can be a time to allow emotions to be felt and expressed. It can be a sacred time when you become increasingly sensitive and may wish to withdraw a little from everyday life.

The unborn child is utterly dependent upon the mother for all its nutrition both physical and emotional. Non-verbal communication continues throughout the pregnancy as the physiological, hormonal and emotional connection between the mother and child is established.

**Treatment with medications** of any type before and during pregnancy is discouraged because once again one wants to keep the body free of any unnatural and unnecessary chemicals. I think of this as akin to growing vegetables organically. Herbs do have an important role in pregnancy, but even something as natural as herbal remedies should only be taken as and when necessary. If you become pregnant, you should not suddenly stop taking any prescribed medications, but discuss this with your health practitioner. Avoid unnecessary supplements, additives, stimulants and this would apply also to cigarettes and alcohol.

**Diet** should have sufficient protein, plenty of raw food, plenty of essential fatty acids (EFAs, e.g. from a good range of vegetable oil/seeds and oily fish, if liked) low salt, folic acid and B6. Low levels of EFA's might predispose your child to asthma. Iron and calcium are important so ensure that the diet contains enough of these. Dried apricots are a good source of iron, nettles are a good source of both calcium and iron and calcium is high in watercress. Remember that the absorption of iron is inhibited by tea and coffee so reduce your consumption of these and take them weak. Try not to worry too much about your weight- you cannot expect to keep your figure during pregnancy, but with care, all will be restored after the birth.

**Supplements in Pregnancy:** In general I do not recommend supplements, but if appetite and diet are poor, then a good quality multivitamin and mineral supplement, produced especially for pregnancy, can be considered, with folic acid being very important while preparing for pregnancy.

**Foods and supplements to avoid in pregnancy:** Raw eggs, raw meat or fish, unpasteurised milk products, skins of jacket potatoes (especially if green, or green potatoes), liver, cod liver oil and Vitamin A supplements (the last three provide unhelpful levels of vitamin A or its precursors). Painkillers, especially aspirin should be avoided. Soya products are fairly high in phyto-oestrogens and some people fear that too many oestrogens in the diet could harm an unborn boy infant. There is a small amount of research on this that might suggest such a link, however, there are many sources of environmental oestrogens e.g. in our water supply, in meat and dairy produce etc, so do not worry too much about the occasional helping of soya. Vegetarians who have some soya at every meal would be wise to find some alternative food product for the occasional meal to maintain a healthy and safe balance.

**Pets** You might have heard about the parasite *Toxoplasmosis gondii* and the possibility that picking in up these parasites when pregnant can lead to problems with the unborn baby's health. These parasites are commonly found in the soil, but also in cats and undercooked pork. They are also found in 50% of the population with absolutely no ill effects, but one should avoid being infected with the parasite for the first time when pregnant. Do not worry overmuch about these parasites but, to be on the safe side, avoid playing with young kittens as they are most likely to have the parasite in the active state. Also, cook meat properly and always wash your hands thoroughly after gardening

**Exercise during pregnancy.** Pregnancy is not an excuse to give up exercise. It is important for the developing child that you maintain good circulation, elimination and muscle tone by plenty of gentle exercise, especially in the fresh air. Walking, dancing, swimming, yoga are good options.

## Common Health Problems in Pregnancy

**Constipation** in pregnancy can occasionally be a problem. It is important not to let this become a regular occurrence as it can lead to varicose veins and too much straining; it also means that the body is not eliminating its waste products properly. I do not recommend the use of harsh laxatives, because one can become dependent upon these. Instead aim for a diet high in natural laxatives especially fruit, vegetables and pulses. Wheat bran can cause heartburn in some people, and it is better to use whole foods -fruits such as apples. Linseeds are a useful addition to bulk up the stool and make the motion easier, but it is important to drink plenty of water when taking linseeds as they do absorb water from the gut. Senna pods are probably the strongest laxative one should consider, and not too regularly, and if this does not help then seek advice.

**Morning Sickness** - Some nausea or indigestion is common in the first trimester, and a few unfortunate women do suffer from severe morning sickness. Digestive disturbance results from hormonal changes and their impact on metabolism, blood sugar levels and the liver. Much improvement can be achieved by ensuring that you do not allow yourself to go hungry- little and often is a good policy. Good quality ginger biscuits can be nibbled regularly, perhaps even before rising from bed, to keep nausea at bay. Crystallised ginger is a useful remedy to keep with you. Chamomile tea is also useful. If vomiting is a serious problem then see your herbalist or other health professional. A herb that we use for morning sickness is *Ballota nigra*, or black horehound.

**Pain and bleeding-** Some unusual feelings and twinges are perfectly normal in pregnancy as your body is undergoing some profound cellular and structural changes to make way for the baby. If you suffer from severe pain or bleeding at any stage of your pregnancy, then rest and consult your medical/herbal practitioner without delay.

**High blood pressure-** Hypertension can occasionally occur especially in the later stages of pregnancy. You will be regularly monitored by your midwife and other medical practitioners. If mild hypertension occurs, then your herbalist may well prescribe one or more of the following- Chamomile, Limeflower, and Lemon Balm. Try to relax when you have your blood pressure taken- otherwise it will go up! If your blood pressure becomes very high then you will be monitored and occasionally you might have to stay in hospital for a while.

**Varicose veins and Haemorrhoids-** The growing baby and increasing weight can make these a problem, especially if your family is prone to them. Avoid standing for long periods, put your feet up as much as possible and avoid tight clothes and wear support tights. Avoid constipation and keep your circulation moving by having as much exercise as possible. Your herbalist will be able to offer you further advice as well as creams containing such herbs as horse chestnut and witch hazel. Rutin supplements as well as foods high in Vitamin C will help the tone of your veins.

**Skin problems-** During pregnancy the skin can erupt in a variety of ways due to the hormonal changes that are occurring. Some women develop spots, others develop rashes on their face, yet many find that their skin is better than ever. In late pregnancy you might develop fungal infection under your breasts or in the groin and you could put a few drops of lavender or tea tree oil in your bath or use a calendula based anti-fungal cream. Occasionally women can develop a sudden itchy rash over the body- this can be related to the liver, a condition called obstetric cholestasis, and you should speak to your practitioner without delay.

**Allergies and rhinitis-** Your body's allergic response often changes during pregnancy and you might find that some of your allergies clear up. However, nasal congestion is often more of a problem even for women who have no allergies. This can be caused by changes in the hormone levels, increasing blood flow to the mucous membranes or possibly an increase in the consumption of dairy products

**Muscle and Leg Cramps** - these are fairly common during pregnancy, especially in the legs due to changes in the calcium/sodium/magnesium balance. Do ensure that you are having enough calcium in your diet. Some women get pains in the legs, restless legs or leg cramps. If this happens, keep your legs raised as much as possible, and try massaging them with a good quality vegetable oil, e.g. grapeseed, and a few drops of Lavender essential oil. If the cramps do not improve, see your herbalist, midwife or doctor

**Stretch Marks-** These occur because the skin is stretched beyond its limits either because of the impact of pregnancy or due to putting on too much weight too quickly. Shortage of vitamin C, essential fatty acids and zinc may make stretch marks more likely so once again keep a close eye on your diet. Massaging the problem areas (normally the stomach, breasts and top of thighs) with Wheatgerm oil mixed with a few drops of Tangerine essential oil can make a difference.

**Essential oils and Aromatherapy-** Do not take any essential oils internally during pregnancy. Avoid aromatherapy treatments in the first three months and ensure that your aromatherapist is properly qualified and understands the importance of using the correct oils. It is generally agreed that the following oils are safe to use in pregnancy: Tangerine, Mandarin, Grapefruit, Geranium, Roman Chamomile, Rose Bulgar and

Maroc, Jasmine, Ylang Ylang and Lavender. Many other oils are perfectly safe and if you would like to know more, there are some very good books available on the subject.

Pregnancy normally lasts around forty weeks and is divided into three stages or trimesters.

### **The first trimester-Weeks 1 to 14**

Sometimes women have a few uncomfortable symptoms in early pregnancy such as morning sickness, tiredness, and awkwardness, irrational moods even depression. These are not very common, but it is worth bearing in mind that they can occur so that you can understand what is happening to you. These can be caused by hormonal changes, but also by emotional attitudes to the pregnancy. This is a very important time for the growing baby-good nutrition is important.

### **The Second Trimester- Weeks 15 to24**

Many women relax a little at this stage because the baby is now well established in the uterus and you are more used to the idea of being pregnant. You are likely to feel less tired and any morning sickness will have begun to recede. Around week 15 it is common to feel some period-like pains in the lower abdomen. Unless there is bleeding, this need not worry you as it is the uterus expanding. At around week 20 you might feel the baby starting to move, although it can be much earlier or later. By the end of the second trimester, the baby will be fully formed, have eyes that open and is about the size of a small watermelon. Possible problems of the second Trimester:

**Anaemia:** If you start to feel tired and look pale it might be that you are becoming anaemic and if you think this is the case then have your iron levels checked. A woman's need for iron increase greatly in pregnancy. If you want to keep your iron level up such as black strap molasses, pumpkin and sunflower seeds, dried fruits, green vegetables eggs and don't forget that iron is better absorbed if accompanied by vitamin C so some fruit juice with your meal is a good idea

**Faintness:** Some women suffer from low blood pressure during pregnancy and this can make them feel faint. Do have this checked regularly. Faintness can also result from low blood sugar do ensure that you are eating enough- perhaps little and often would be your best policy.

### **The Third Trimester- Week 25 to 40**

Your baby's taste buds have developed by week 30 and he or she will often learn now to develop your tastes. Backache is the main problem in this trimester, so keep an eye on your posture, avoid wearing high heels and be conscious of how you lift things. Heartburn can also be a problem in this trimester as the body can press on the stomach causing the stomach contents to reflux. The hormone progesterone causes the slackening of the muscle at the top of the stomach so this makes matters worse. Again, eat little and often and use an extra pillow at night. Slippery elm tablets are safe in pregnancy and will ease the burning. Now is the time to start Raspberry Leaf tea- talk to your herbalist or midwife

### **Labour**

If you have been drinking your Raspberry Leaf tea, hopefully the process of labour will be speedy. There are a number of herbs that are used to assist in labour to make contractions come more quickly or to slow them down. Speak to your herbalist about this when the time comes.

### **After the birth**

Carry on drinking the Raspberry leaf tea as this will help with restoring the uterus. Too much raspberry leaf is reputed to dry up breast milk a little, so limit yourself to a cup a day. Don't forget the pelvic floor exercise once you are healed- you will regret it in twenty years time if you do!

## **Herbs to avoid in Pregnancy**

All Schedule 3 herbs, and other toxic herbs only available from a herbalist- if in doubt, speak to your herbalist

Ginkgo, The Artemesias/Wormwoods, Hops, Poke Root, Juniper, Sage in large quantities, Tansy, Parsley in large quantities, Rue, Thuja, Barberry, Pennyroyal, Goldenseal, Hormonal herbs such as Wild Yam, Black Cohosh, Vitex Agnus Castus, Hops, Fenugreek

## **Herbs used in pregnancy under the supervision of your Herbalist:**

Raspberry leaf in the last 4 months.

Black Haw

Limeflower/Chamomile/Lemon Balm

Nettle

Mitchella repens in the last 3 months

Hormonal herbs as required to treat specific conditions such as threatened miscarriage.

Ginger, Garlic, Kelp, mint,

Herbs for insomnia and the nervous system.

## **Have a joyful pregnancy**

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