

## Aromatherapy during childbirth

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This leaflet outlines the benefits and risks of using essential oils and aromatherapy during labour. If you are using aromatherapy prior to being admitted in labour please inform staff on your arrival.

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### Would you like to use aromatherapy during labour?

Here at the Royal Berkshire Hospital we can offer you aromatherapy to help facilitate the normal physiological process of birth. Many of our midwives have been trained by a qualified midwife/aromatherapist to enable them to offer women aromatherapy in labour.



Aromatherapy is used nationally as complementary therapy for women in labour. Results from a study of 8,085 women, undertaken at the John Radcliffe Hospital in Oxford, show that women in labour consistently rated aromatherapy as helpful by aiding relaxation and reducing stress and anxiety. The study also showed that women using aromatherapy were less likely to request diamorphine or an epidural for pain relief. Similar findings were reported in the 2010 Maternity Unit Audit of the Aromatherapy service offered to women.

### What is aromatherapy?

It is a complementary therapy using essential oils - concentrated extracts from a wide range of plants. The oils work in two ways:

1. By stimulating the nasal/olfactory senses (smell) and mental responses promoting relaxation.
2. The chemical components of the oils are presumed to work in the same ways as medicines, but are not suitable to be taken by mouth.

### How are the oils applied?

The aromatherapy oils can be applied in a variety of ways, including:

- In the bath.
- By massage.
- In a footbath.
- In a compress.
- By inhalation methods.

### Can anyone use aromatherapy?

If your pregnancy has been uncomplicated and it is expected that your labour will be straightforward, then you may be able to use essential oils during your labour. It will also depend on whether the midwife who is looking after you has been trained to offer aromatherapy. Because of the action of some of the essential oils it is not recommended for aromatherapy to be used in early pregnancy, so some members of the multidisciplinary team may not be able to care for you while using aromatherapy and it may be necessary to move you to a different room if you later require an epidural or assisted vaginal delivery. For this reason if you are using aromatherapy prior to being admitted in labour please inform staff on your arrival

The essential oils that we use in the Maternity Unit at the Royal Berkshire Hospital have been chosen for their safety and effectiveness in childbirth. The midwives will advise you on which essential oils and method of use will benefit you most.

### Side effects and safety

From the large study of 8,085 women performed 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 vomiting and nausea, headache and allergic response (symptoms like hay fever, and watery eyes). These symptoms may have occurred during the course of labour even if the aromatherapy had not been used.

In the Maternity Unit at the Royal Berkshire Hospital we only use a small selection of good quality oils. The carrier oil that we use for blending our essential oils for massage is grape seed oil.

### Finding out more

To find out more about using aromatherapy during childbirth, please contact Laura Wallbank (Midwife/aromatherapist) at [laura.wallbank@nhs.net](mailto:laura.wallbank@nhs.net) or Yvonne Bishop (Midwife trained in aromatherapy in pregnancy and birth) at [Yvonne.Bishop@royalberkshire.nhs.uk](mailto:Yvonne.Bishop@royalberkshire.nhs.uk) For more information regarding the use of essential oils during pregnancy and labour, it is advisable to seek advice from a qualified aromatherapist with experience in caring for pregnant and labouring women. Essential oils are perfectly safe when used correctly but have the potential to be harmful when used incorrectly.

The website [www.expectancy.co.uk](http://www.expectancy.co.uk) provides a list of aromatherapists qualified to provide advice in pregnancy and childbirth.

This document can be made available in other languages and formats upon request.

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