PAIN MANAGEMENT IN LABOUR

RELAXATION / COMFORT MEASURES

AROMATHERAPY

Key Words: Aromatherapy, essential oils, vaporiser, complementary therapies, massage in labour, alternative therapies in labour, non-pharmacological pain relief

AIM

- To provide a safe, non-invasive therapy promoting relaxation and assistance with pain relief for women in labour.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Aromatherapy is the use of essential oils distilled from plants and administered by inhalation, massage, or used in hydrotherapy. The use of the essential oils is believed to influence mood, and be associated with antiviral, antibacterial, antifungal, antiseptic, anti-inflammatory, and sedative benefits. The two types of oils used are essential oils and carrier oils.

Essential oils are flammable and evaporate rapidly to form vapours, and should only be used externally, and never undiluted. The carrier or base oils are used to blend the essential oils e.g. grape seed, olive oil, and apricot kernel oil. Carrier oils inhibit evaporation of the essential oils and encourage absorption into the skin. The oil should be cold pressed to prevent changes in the oil composition which occurs if heated.

KEY POINTS

1. Two Cochrane reviews indicate there is currently insufficient evidence to recommend benefit from use of aromatherapy for pain management in labour. There are also no studies available demonstrating harm to the woman or fetus although 1% had a mild unpleasant response.

2. Until further well-designed studies are conducted, caution should be applied when aromatherapy is utilised. The lowest possible dosage should be used on the least number of occasions.

3. All women using complementary therapies should complete the ‘MR810.01 Acknowledgement of Complementary Therapies’ form.

4. A competent aroma therapist should blend the essential and carrier oils to ensure the correct type, dosage and administration.

5. Essential oils are selected according to their botanical names as the chemical compositions vary according to the plant. The oil should be checked by its botanical name to ensure it is safe for intrapartum use.
6. Aromatherapy oils are preferably stored in amber or dark bottled glass, out of direct sunlight, or ultraviolet light. The bottle must be tightly capped and stored out of the reach of children.

7. **Essential oils are for external use only, and should always be diluted.** Avoid contact with the eyes or mucous membranes.

8. Essential oils should be the only ingredient added to carrier oil.

9. Essential oils may be administered through vaporisers, hydrotherapy or massage.

10. The only type of vaporiser used at KEMH should be a thermostatically controlled electric device. After each use it should be cleaned to remove any residue. A new vaporiser should be checked for safety by the Physical Resources staff at KEMH prior to use.

11. The pharmacy at KEMH should be contacted if the safety of an essential oil is unknown.

**CONTRA-INDICATIONS**

Massage oils should not be used on women with a history of skin allergies or skin disease.

**PRIOR TO USE OF AROMATHERAPY**

Prior to use, ensure:

- the woman has no allergies, skin irritations, or skin disease
- verbal consent has been obtained
- the smell of the oil blend is not unpleasant for the woman
- midwives and doctors should be familiar with KEMH policy W107 Use of Complementary Therapies and the woman has completed the ‘MR810.01: Acknowledgement of Complementary Therapies’ form (can be printed from within the policy).

**APPLICATION / ADMINISTRATION OF AROMATHERAPY**

**VAPOURISATION**

- The essential oil is placed into an electrical thermostatically controlled apparatus to facilitate vaporisation. The apparatus should be checked by the Physical resources Department prior to use to ensure safety.
- Add 2 - 5 drops of essential oil to the water in the vaporiser.
- The water should be changed every 4 hours and a fresh mix of essential oils and water made, as the aromatic molecules may have evaporated.

**MASSAGE**

- Assess the woman for skin disease or allergies.\(^4\)
- The massage oil mixture should be prepared by a competent therapist. The oil blend is applied directly to the woman’s skin.
- Suitable oils that may be beneficial are lavender oil which is applied for its calming and soothing properties\(^9\), rose oil for its calming effect\(^9\), and peppermint oil is believed to relieve nausea and vomiting and facilitate uterine action.\(^10\)

**HYDROTHERAPY**

- Essential oils should be diluted prior to being put into bath water. Add 6 - 8 drops of essential oil to one tablespoon of vegetable oil or full cream milk and agitate into the water. This decreases the risk of causing skin irritation.\(^3\)
- Bergamot, lavender and sandalwood are used for their soothing and calming effects.\(^3\)
- Compresses are made by adding 2-3 drops of essential oil to a bowl of water (at least a litre) into which a cloth is added, squeezed out, then applied to the area being treated.\(^3\)

**COMMON ESSENTIAL OILS DURING LABOUR**

Some aromatherapy oils may be beneficial for intrapartum anxiety reduction and relaxation.\(^11, 12\)

Common oils that are used during intrapartum care include:

- Rose
- Lavender
- Peppermint
- Lemon
- Eucalyptus
- Bergamot
- Jasmine

See next page for potential effects and additional information.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ESSENTIAL OIL</th>
<th>POTENTIAL EFFECTS</th>
<th>ADDITIONAL INFORMATION</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rose (Rosa Centifolia)</td>
<td>Relaxing⁴ ¹⁰, assists contractions¹⁰, antidepressant⁴ ¹⁰</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lavender (Lavender Officinalis)</td>
<td>Analgesic¹⁰, reduces anxiety¹⁰, enhances uterine action¹⁰</td>
<td>Avoid use with women who have hypotension. Use cautiously with women having an epidural. Can have a diuretic effect. May cause skin irritation.⁸</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peppermint (Mentha Piperita)</td>
<td>Relief from nausea⁴ ¹⁰, analgesia⁴, decongestant⁴, antispasmodic⁴, facilitates uterine action¹⁰.</td>
<td>May cause skin irritation.⁸</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lemon (Citrus Lemon)</td>
<td>Refreshing and uplifting.⁴</td>
<td>May cause skin irritation. Avoid use with women who have hypotension. Use cautiously with women having an epidural. Can have a diuretic effect.⁸</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eucalyptus (Eucalyptus Globus)</td>
<td>Antibacterial, decongestant, energising.⁴</td>
<td>Can have a diuretic effect.⁸</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bergamot</td>
<td>Analgesic, uplifting.¹⁰</td>
<td>May cause skin irritation.⁸</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: Clary Sage (Salvia Sclerea) should not be used as it may have an effect of increasing / strengthening uterine activity. This may cause potential risk to women with threatened premature labour, or with a uterine scar.¹³
REFERENCES / STANDARDS


7. Tiran D. Late for a very important date. The practising midwife. 2006;9(3):16-8.


Do not keep printed versions of guidelines as currency of information cannot be guaranteed. Access the current version from the WNHS website.

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