AIMS For a better birth...

Choosing Alternatives

By Pat Thomas

AIMS Journal 1999, Vol 11 No 3

Women who are interested in alternative forms of maternity care, are also often interested in alternative medicine. They may address the aches and pains of pregnancy with massage or may take homeopathic preparations to help them through labour. Equally many midwives are now taking up additional training in aromatherapy, massage and homeopathy. However it is the use of over the counter alternatives by women themselves which has seen the biggest boom in the last few years. In this brief article, Pat Thomas talks about the increasing use of alternative medicine among pregnant women and midwives, gently challenges the idea that all natural medicines are inherently "good" and makes suggestions to help women choose wisely.

Many of the physical and emotional symptoms of pregnancy are startling. Some women, particularly first time mothers, worry that if they feel unwell that it is a sign that there is something wrong with the baby though this is rarely the case. Pregnancy does however, place a degree of strain on your body which will be changing more rapidly than at any other time in your life and the symptoms of that strain can be show as constipation, backaches, nausea and emotional upheavals.

While it's tempting to run to your GP or midwife at the first uncomfortable twinge, the experience of doing so is often frustrating. Overworked GPs and midwives often simply don't have the time to listen to stories about women's aches and pains and often they are at a loss as to how to help them anyway.

In contrast, anecdotal, and increasingly research, evidence suggests that several alternative therapies, especially acupuncture, aromatherapy, herbalism, homeopathy and various forms of massage can be chosen with confidence to deal with minor aches and pains as well as easing emotional worries.

What is more, while some therapies such as osteopathy, acupuncture, chiropractic and more advanced herbal medicine, require the participation of a highly trained and experienced therapist others, such as homeopathy, self-massage, simple aromatherapy and nutritional measures can be simply and safely applied as a form of "self-help".

Alternative therapies offer two important services to pregnant women - they are generally safe and effective and some offer ways of self-treatment which can increase a woman's confidence in her ability to care effectively for herself and her baby.

Some Common Sense About Alternatives

There is an assumption that everything natural is good. While natural alternatives are unlikely to cause

great harm, in unskilled hands they are capable of doing damage. Many natural remedies can be extremely powerful and no matter what any therapist tells you a remedy or treatment cannot be both powerful and totally benign. Anything capable of producing profound positive change must also be capable of producing profound negative change in some. This is as true for alternative medicine as it is for conventional medicine.

The conventional approach to healing encourages the "patient" to switch off and leave everything to the experts. Often we take this attitude with us when we make the shift to an alternative therapy. A more positive way of approaching alternatives is to consider that they provide a unique opportunity to break out of this negative pattern and take charge of your own health.

Many alternative practitioners encourage their clients to become partners in their own health. Once you do this you will never view the conventional system of care in the same way. Having accepted responsibility for their own health, many women find a new confidence to dictate to their conventional carers the kind of care they wish to receive during pregnancy, rather than simply being passive recipients of routine care.

If you are new to the use of alternative therapies (and even for those who are not so new) there are some common sense guidelines to consider.

It shouldn't hurt

This sounds obvious but it is amazing what some people will put up with! The golden rule with any therapy is the same as it is with conventional medicine - first do no harm. Massage, chiropractic or osteopathy should NEVER hurt. If it does inform your practitioner. If he or she does not listen, get a new practitioner.

Occasionally some therapies including (but not limited to) reflexology, homeopathy and herbs can occasionally produce what is known as a "healing crisis" - a temporary worsening of symptoms. This should not be severe and it should not last a long time. Some therapists get quite enthusiastic about healing crises and encourage their patients to put up with all manner of adverse side effects. Pregnancy is not a time to be going through a major healing crisis. If your unhappy with the effect of a particular therapy and your practitioner does not hear and act on your feelings, change practitioners. This advice, by the way, also applies to midwives, GPs and obstetricians. You always have the right to switch to someone new if you are unhappy with your care.

Give it time

Whatever form of therapy you choose and provided you do not actually feel worse, give it time. Alternative therapies do not work in the same way as conventional therapies. Conventional medicine works, in the main, by suppressing symptoms. Alternative therapies work by addressing the cause and healing the whole body. This process can take time. Bouncing from one practitioner or therapy to another because things aren't moving fast enough is likely to be counter productive.

Always ask "What's in it?"

Using alternative therapies provides a unique opportunity to become a participant in our own good health. Start by doing your homework. Detailed information on all the alternative therapies is beyond the scope of this book. However there exists a wealth of information in libraries and book shops about all forms of alternative therapies. The choice of therapy is highly individual so don't simply rely on claims and recommendations. Make an informed decision and refuse to be passive about the "stuff" which you are offered.

Always ask what's in a particular remedy, tincture or pill. Check which oils your aromatherapist is using. These are not trade secrets and should not be treated as such. Ask also what each of the ingredients does and what you can expect from a particular remedy. Any therapist who is reluctant to answer such basic questions should be regarded with suspicion.

Less is more

With all alternative remedies take a less is more approach. Generally speaking you should only take a remedy up to the point where you begin to feel better. The point of alternative medicine is to support the body's own ability to heal and change not to undermine it or do all the work for it. Studies into some herbs, for instance, have shown that taking larger amounts does not always produce better or faster results than taking small regular doses. The same is true for homeopathy, and a good osteopath or reflexologist will know when "hands off" is better than "hands on".

Work with your body

Have some faith that your body can do what it is supposed to. It can make a healthy baby. It can cope with all these tremendous physical changes. It can tell you what is wrong both physically and emotionally if you learn to listen to it. Before you go running to any practitioner, conventional or alternative, take some time to "tune in" to your real needs.

Spend a few days getting plenty of rest, eating good food, accepting help from others and paying attention to any feelings and intuitions you have. Is your backache telling you to stop "carrying" so much? Are you nauseous because you just can't "stomach" something anymore? Are your chronic headaches a sign to "get out of your head" and pay closer attention to the demands of your changing body? If, things improve after a few days, great. You have found a solution, or a beginning of one. If you still feel that you would like extra help then choose a therapy which you feel comfortable with.

Following these simple guidelines should ensure that you get the best out of whatever therapy you choose.

The above article was adapted from Pat Thomas' book *Pregnancy: The Common Sense Approach* (Gill & MacMillan, 1999).