THE ROLE OF ACUPUNCTURE IN CHILDBIRTH

By Erin Boedeker, LAc & Melissa Pfannenstiel, LAc Licensed Acupuncturists

As our society has evolved, many have become interested in integrating ancient healing modalities with the scientific approach to health care. Acupuncture works to mobilize the body’s own healing potential to gently shift from disorder to a more harmonious state and is a great complement to conventional medical care. Receiving acupuncture during pregnancy, birthing and postpartum works to align any disrupted qi (energy) to create a more positive, balanced and present experience.

In the final weeks of pregnancy, many women begin to construct a birth plan trying to anticipate any needs or desires that may arise leading up to and during labor. Part of a birth plan often includes options for inducing labor and pain control during childbirth. Acupuncture and acupressure can be very effective birthing aids and alternatives to medical intervention during labor.

Acupuncture and its paired modalities including herbs, gua sha (friction scraping), cupping and electrical stimulation of needles can also provide integral support to an expectant mother who is approaching full term. For those choosing acupuncture, beginning in the 36th or 37th week of pregnancy, it is recommended for the mother to receive acupuncture once each week leading up to birth. These pre-birth treatments during these weeks are not to induce labor. If a mother is contemplating using acupuncture during labor, any concerns about acupuncture (Will it hurt? How will I feel afterwards?) may be alleviated by having a few pre-birth treatments. These treatments can be helpful in preparing the uterus, pelvis and cervix for birth while also optimizing energy and generating a sense of calm and relaxation, which encourages an efficient labor.

Debra Betts, a prominent acupuncturist in New Zealand who specializes in acupuncture for pregnancy and delivery, participated in a study with 14 midwives who found that women who received pre-birth acupuncture were 35% less likely to be medically induced and 31% less likely to receive an epidural. In other words, pre-birth acupuncture treatments consistently increased the chances of women experiencing a natural efficient labor with reduced intervention rates (including medical inductions and cesarean sections).

"Acupuncture is a complementary therapy to help relax mothers, offers a reduction in pain without narcotic side effects and promotes healing after birth," said Certified Nurse Midwife Pam Parsons, Glacier Maternity and Women's Center. "I'm always in favor of using any safe option that benefits my patients, and acupuncture is one modality I recommend."

The scope of acupuncture within the realm of childbirth, birthing and post-partum is extensive. It can be used as an option between 34 and 36 weeks to help turn a breech baby. Acupuncture for labor induction also is available and is a safe and effective practice that typically involves three consecutive treatments to gently encourage the body to begin the process naturally. Induction treatments are conducted with the permission of a mother's primary care provider no sooner than 39 weeks gestation or directly preceding a scheduled medical induction.

Acupuncture can be used during labor as well. It has strong functions to increase and sustain contractions, stimulate cervical dilation, increase endorphin release (the body's natural coping mechanism for pain) and calm the mind.

To provide support for women during childbirth, Acupuncture services are available on an on-call basis at North Valley Hospital. There are a variety of tools at our disposal to help women to remain comfortable while helping them experience every potential benefit that acupuncture can offer.

As an alternative to needle therapy, acupressure may be performed by an acupuncturist or birth partner to achieve similar results. We also provide an educational component during a section of North Valley Hospital's pre-natal class where we not only explain the benefits of acupuncture & acupressure in labor, but also teach the location of acupoints on the body which are beneficial during labor. During labor, the birthing partner can massage these points in order to provide pain relief and help calm the mother by combining the power of touch with the time proven effectiveness of acupuncture points.

Acupuncture treatments are also available post-partum at North Valley Hospital. These treatments help to bring the body into balance following delivery, moderate and support the flow of breast milk and restore energy. Another benefit for post-partum acupuncture is following a C-section. Post-op acupuncture can decrease pain sensations resulting in smaller doses of pain medicine while still allowing the new mother to be mobile.


Melissa Pfannenstiel is a licensed acupuncturist and Certified Doula who has been practicing in Whitefish since 2006 and providing acupuncture services to NVH patients since the origin of the Planetree's acupuncture program in 2000. She is a graduate of The Academy of Classical Oriental Sciences" in Nelson, B.C. and particularly enjoys working with pregnant mammas. She LOVES living in the Flathead Valley with her husband and two spirited young children.

Erin Boedeker graduated with a Masters of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine from Bastyr University in December 2009. Erin is a NCCAO Board Certified and Montana Licensed Acupuncturist and Chinese Herbalist. She has been in private practice in Whitefish and Columbia Falls since 2010. Erin treats all ages for all sorts of reasons and especially loves helping women conceive and support them through pregnancy, delivery and postpartum times.