

## **Massage Therapy for Healing after Cesarean Birth**

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When a woman gives birth by cesarean section, she has scars that need to heal. Unless there are physical complications such as infection, the surface scar usually heals automatically. Deeper scarring, both physical (from deep adhesions) and emotional (in reaction to the surgery), may take more time and conscious effort to heal.

To recover from a cesarean birth and to prepare for a subsequent pregnancy and birth a woman needs to heal on all levels. This includes deep tissue healing as well as releasing emotions related to the surgery, which may be stored in “charged” areas of her body. Because the mind and the body reflect each other, physical injuries can have emotional consequences. Similarly, emotional and mental conflicts can have their corresponding physical manifestations. For instance, a woman who frequently refrains from speaking her mind may have a chronically tight jaw, or a woman with repressed anger may unconsciously frown or clench her fists. Bringing the repressed feelings into her awareness can allow her to begin to heal. A safe, comforting, non-sexual touch such as massage therapy can help her to focus on the relevant areas of her body and on the necessary healing.

### **Physical Healing**

Cesarean birth can save the lives of mothers and babies. However, during any type of injury or surgery, the body registers pain and reacts to being violated. It tries to protect itself from further injury by setting up involuntary muscle contractions and tension in the injured area. For instance, I have noticed in my work with massage therapy clients that an area of ticklishness in an otherwise non-ticklish person almost always indicates an unusual chronic muscle tension. When a woman’s body keeps this “internal sentry” standing guard it can cause a secondary pain which may outlast her original pain.

Chronic pain may indicate the formation of adhesions after surgery. Adhesions are bands of scar tissue that can distort anatomy and “glue” together organs and tissues that are normally separate. Adhesion formation is particularly common (some estimates are as high 94-100 percent)<sup>1,2</sup> following pelvic surgery (involving uterus, fallopian tubes and ovaries, including cesarean section).

Adhesions can be a result of the inflammatory response to surgery, or to excessive or rough handling of organs, infection, excessive hemostatic techniques resulting in tissue

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<sup>1</sup> Laparoscopic Hospital. *Laparoscopy and Postoperative adhesion formation*. Retrieved November 22, 2005 from [http://laparoscopyhospital.com/laparoscopy\\_and\\_postoperative\\_adhesion.htm](http://laparoscopyhospital.com/laparoscopy_and_postoperative_adhesion.htm)

<sup>2</sup> Women’s Surgery Group. *Adhesions Overview*. Retrieved November 22, 2005 from <http://www.womensurgerygroup.com/conditions/Adhesions/overview.asp>

ischemia, delayed postoperative mobilization of the patient, inadequate fluid and electrolyte balance postoperatively, and existing conditions such as poor nutrition, prior surgeries and endometriosis. Poor surgical technique can also play a role in the formation of adhesions.<sup>1</sup> An important clue that adhesions have formed may be the appearance of the abdominal scar. Tissues that are "glued" together cause an unevenness as the top layer of skin is pulled down to deeper tissue layers.

Adhesions can cause chronic abdominal pain, dyspareunia (pain during intercourse), bowel obstruction and infertility (caused by the fallopian tubes being kinked, distorted or blocked by adhesions). Subsequent surgeries, including repeat cesareans, are more complicated when adhesions cause a more difficult and lengthy dissection of tissues.

Surgery for "lysis of adhesions" (cutting scar tissue) is commonly performed as a corrective procedure, resulting in 303,000 hospitalizations in one year alone at a cost of \$1.3 billion.<sup>3</sup> However, adhesions can reform as often as 80 percent of the time and additional adhesions can form as a direct result of the surgery meant to release them.<sup>4</sup>

Certain massage techniques such as Bindegewebsmassage, neuromuscular therapy, Rolfing and deep tissue sculpting can limit the formation of adhesions and scar tissue in new injuries and can reduce or make the scar tissue in old injuries more pliable.

As soon after surgery as her doctor approves it, delicate massage and thermal heat stimulation using body heat from the massage therapist's hands, can increase circulation (reducing ischemia) to the injured tissues, discourage the formation of thick keloid scars and adhesions, drain injured tissues of the build-up of excess fluid caused by the surgery and help re-establish the lymphatic flow. Even earlier, the woman can seek approval from her doctor to use her own (clean) hands to gently touch her incision to provide the thermal stimulation. Clockwise, circular massage can help re-establish the flow of the intestines and stimulate organ function. After about two weeks, gentle vibration of the skin over the incision, progressing to deeper pressure as healing occurs, can stimulate nerves and help relieve any numbness. Tissue stretching can begin after about six weeks to encourage movement and to loosen existing adhesions. Abdominal "trigger points," or irritable spots which make the muscles prone to spasm, should be located and extinguished with appropriate techniques.

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<sup>3</sup> Ray NF, Denton WG, Thamer M, Henderson SC, & Perry S. (1998) Abdominal adhesiolysis: inpatient care and expenditures in the United States in 1994. *Journal of the American College of Surgeons*; 186(1), 1-9

<sup>4</sup> Hammoud, A., Gago, L A, & Diamond, MP. (2004) Adhesions in Patients with chronic pelvic pain: a role for adhesiolysis? *Fertility and Sterility, The Official Journal of the American Society for Reproductive Medicine*, 4[4]82(6), 1483-1491

## **Emotional Healing**

As a massage therapist, I've noticed that even a medically necessary, planned cesarean which resulted in a beautiful, healthy child may still bring about emotional turmoil in the mother. That turmoil may be present whether or not she links it to her surgical experience. During and after the surgery, physical "damage reports" flooded her nervous system. As an operating room nurse, I've noticed that even while totally anesthetized, a patient's heart rate and/or blood pressure can go up in response to certain aspects of the surgery. Unconscious psychological controls can be activated, potentially producing anxiety, jumpiness, a lowered pain threshold--even a subconscious feeling of betrayal and anger. Long after visible scars are healed, she may still feel emotionally overwhelmed by details and obligations. She may distance herself from other people or from herself and her experience. She may not be aware of, or allow herself to feel, her emotions, storing them in her body instead. Busy dealing with her physical recovery and caring for a new baby, she may never make time for emotional healing nor even be aware that she needs it.

Until she finds a place where she can feel safe enough to release both the stored emotions and the muscle contractions with which her body is protecting itself, she may continue to physically and emotionally guard the areas where pain has lodged. A non-judgmental massage therapist, certified in pregnancy and postpartum massage therapy, may offer a safe place for her to experience positive touch, to develop awareness of her "charged" areas and to reconnect with her body and her emotions.

Just as surgery involves more than the physical body, massage is more than just rubbing oil onto someone's skin. Touching connects to the brain's emotional centers. Massage therapy can be empowering, reaching not just the body but the self-image as well. As the woman gradually becomes aware of feelings stored in her body (possibly in the form of ticklishness, a clenched jaw or a rigid neck or shoulders) she can begin to use this awareness in her healing process. Once she acknowledges her feelings, she can take the energy she's been using to block them and use it instead to guide their release.

Like her baby, a post-cesarean birth mother may need to be cradled. Her doctor and other caregivers usually don't have the kind of training or the time to work with her the way a massage therapist can. Although it is not a massage therapist's job to provide psychological counseling, massage therapy can support her when she wants to cry or express emotion and help her feel at home again in her post-surgery body. Releasing deeply ingrained emotional patterns and extreme negative self-images may require the help of a psychological counselor. Especially for a woman who wants to attempt a subsequent vaginal birth, this release can be a vital part of recovery. If she hasn't dealt with her emotions before her next labor, she'll likely have to deal with them again in the middle of it. From my experience, a woman giving birth following a previous cesarean birth can experience a slowing down or stopping of her labor at the point at which the cesarean was performed, as old thoughts and emotional patterns surface. The more deeply her issues are hidden, the more difficult they may be to resolve.

## **A Doula's Role**

From adhesions causing chronic pain and infertility, to repressed emotions and self-image issues, the deeper scars that can follow a cesarean birth require healing. A complete healing is possible if a woman seeks and accepts appropriate care. Doulas can be an important part of this healing process by identifying women in need of healing and encouraging and supporting them in their search for it. If a woman seeks massage therapy, encourage her to check her massage therapist's credentials for membership in an association such as the National Association of Pregnancy Massage and certification by a reputable training organization such as *Bodywork for the Childbearing Year* or *Pre-and Peri-Natal Massage Therapy*.

Editor's Note: Though it is not the focus of this article, be aware that a woman may experience her baby's birth as traumatic even when it is not surgical. Pregnant women, doulas and others may also enjoy and benefit from massage therapy.

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