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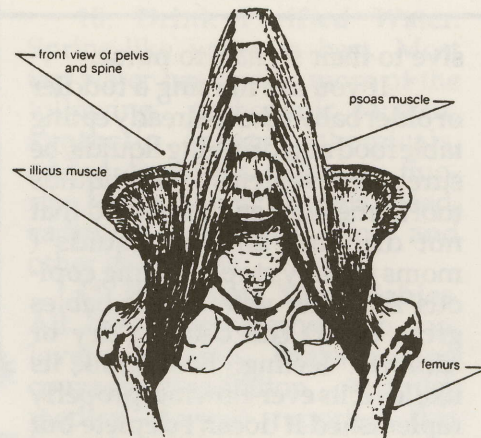
Pregnancy And The Psoas Muscle

by Liz Koch

A pregnant neighbor one month "overdue" is scheduled for induction. She is experienced with birth, knows her babies take an extra month to grow, and is aware of how an induction affects labor. She feels confused and pressured. With lots of guests popping in from out of town, she feels unable to nest and center in on the coming birth. Her husband is supportive but preoccupied with work. She and I release her psoas and can feel the baby's head move low into her pelvis. She cancels her induction and goes into spontaneous labor within 24 hours.

A soon to be first time mother is referred to me by her obstetrician. He is concerned that her daily telephone calls reflect her fears and inability to face the challenge of birth and mothering. He hopes the session will help her to relax. By releasing her psoas we work together to recognize the "energy of birth"; where in herself to focus her attention. The new found sensation awakens and deepens her trust in her body's ability to give birth. She has a long, hard labor and a smooth wonderful birth. She feels elated with herself and her new role as mother.

A potential VBAC mom enters my office for her first visit. She is in light labor and is feeling ambivalent about the birth. She says she wants a vaginal birth but fears the unknowns of labor whereas she knows what to expect from a repeat cesarean. She walks around my office during mild contractions, breathing lightly. Her walking is ungrounded, with no focus and offers no relief. Her first baby never "dropped" down. We work together and she confronts her resistance, allowing unacknowledged feelings to surface. She realizes she wants to birth on her own, assisted by other women. She does not want her husband present as she feels she gives her power away in his presence. Her feelings of inhibition prevent her from doing what feels necessary to let go, yet she is un-



understanding of herself, but lacking the time to assimilate these new found feelings, her attempt at a VBAC fails and she has another cesarean.

A very confident, older, pregnant woman having her first child is referred to me for back discomfort. She has a history of back problems and during the pregnancy is experiencing sciatic nerve pain. She is articulate and clear what she wants from her health care providers, and her birth experience. As we work to release her psoas she begins to soften. Being in control gives way to trusting her body. As she experiences a deeper place of balance, her center of gravity changes and she senses support from within. Her back pain is released and her sciatic discomfort relieved.

What do all these women share in common? Working with the psoas (pronounced so-az) they discovered the keystone of a balanced, well organized body. The psoas is a massive muscle located on each side of the spine. It links the ribcage and trunk directly with the legs. The psoas is a core muscle and as such directly influences the relationship of the bones to one another, in turn affecting freedom of movement in the joints. It influences the diaphragm, as well as organ and nerve functioning.

When the psoas is contracted or shortened, it can reduce the internal space available for organs and viscera as well as the womb and growing fetus. A woman's en-

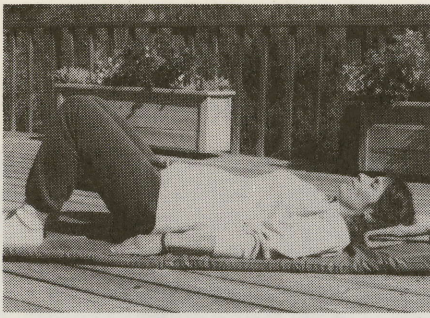
tire reproductive system is affected by the condition of the psoas both by the nerve and blood supply and by the position of the organs in the pelvis. It is valuable to understand the influence the psoas muscle has on skeletal muscular tone, breath, and health of blood, nerve and viscera—all so vital during pregnancy, as well as the role it plays in the health of a woman's emotional life.

The psoas muscle is part of the fear reflex. It is one of the muscles which prepares us to flee or flight. It is because of this that I firmly disapprove of manipulating the psoas manually or via deep body work massage!

When we feel afraid our psoas muscle contracts. If we are in a continual state of anxiety and hold on to our fears, the psoas muscle eventually shortens. When it is not actively engaged, it can atrophy. Childhood conditioning both emotionally (the emotional climate of home, school, etc.; if and how; emotions were expressed) and physically (the use of playpens, walkers, etc.) plays an important role in determining the health of the psoas muscle. Pregnancy offers a natural opportunity to lengthen and tonify the psoas. Due to the extra weight and increased awareness in the center of her body, a pregnant woman tends to bring her attention into the "HARA" (the Japanese word for belly). She experiences a "right center of gravity", a feeling of centerness which is truly an expansive and deepening sense of her self and her innate power.

In very practical terms, releasing the psoas means the pregnant woman has more room for her growing baby, her organs and viscera. Her pelvis becomes a bowl containing all of life. Rather than carry her baby out in front of her, feeling overwhelmed and off balance, she can draw inward strength and satisfaction from her growing belly.

When labor begins a released psoas encourages the downward



flow of energy and assists her release of the baby. In a physically and emotionally trusting place, this can facilitate the labor and birth. If there is disharmony, internal sensation and feeling will signal her to ask for the necessary changes.

Keeping the psoas muscle released throughout the **FIRST TRIMESTER** of pregnancy can center a woman's awareness internally, releasing the initial fears, relieving nausea and smoothing hormonal changes. It increases blood flow essential to the growing fetus while bringing more nourishment, better circulation and assisting digestion.

In the **SECOND TRIMESTER**, working with the psoas creates more room for the growing fetus, stimulates organ functioning, and helps accommodate the shifting support of the body. Releasing the psoas relieves minor aches and pains of pregnancy and contributes to a sense of well being.

During the **THIRD TRIMESTER**, releasing the psoas will relieve pressure from the discomfort of an ever-growing belly and increases energy. It helps to prepare the woman for birth by releasing fears and pent up emotions, as well as attuning a first-time mother to "birth energy", the power that will see her through. It brings the mental type of woman out of her "head" and draws her attention fully to her belly and in turn to her gut feelings while stimulating her intuitive insight.

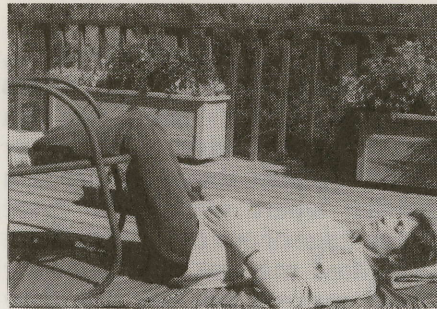
During **LABOR**, a relaxed psoas assists the pelvis bones in opening to allow the baby's movement through the birth canal. Psoas work enhances a woman's birth experience, shortens labor and, in some cases, can

be a good alternative to induction or at least a first step before induction.

So, how to work with the psoas?

The ability to release another person's psoas takes skilled hands and personal awareness of one's own psoas! I do not recommend just anyone trying it. However, I do urge all pregnant women to work with their own psoas muscle as part of their pre-natal yoga or exercise program.

To begin: Choose a place to work that is quiet, and where no one will be stepping over or around you. Where you choose to work will play a part in how relaxed and open you can allow yourself to become. Lie down on a padded floor on your back, knees bent at a 45-degree angle, feet on the floor. Separate your feet and your knees the width of your hip sockets (remember they are located in the front of your pelvis). Place a towel no thicker than



one and one half inches under the back of your head. Fold the towel neatly so that it is flat under your head. Place it under the upper half of the skull, not under the neck. The function of the towel is to support the cervical spine so that it is at the same level all along the back. The head should tilt neither forward toward the chest nor backward toward the floor. Allow your arms to rest at your sides, on your pelvis, or loosely over your chest. Allow your eyes to remain open and soft in the sockets.

When you first lie down, if you notice that your back is arched, leave it that way **use no force**. Instead, allow your thoughts to quiet, bringing your attention to sensing the inside of your body, especially the pelvic

area. As you lie there, the lower spine will begin to have weight and will eventually release and lengthen along the floor by itself. This is a result of the psoas muscle stretching. In this position, gravity influences the skeleton by releasing the psoas. Force is neither needed nor helpful!

When you are ready to leave the position, roll over and rest for a moment before getting up slowly. Don't pull yourself up out of the position. Once on your feet, take the time to observe any differences you feel in standing up.

Lying down in this position for 10 to 20 minutes every day revitalizes the body and prepares it for the day's activities. The best times to work are in the morning and after the day's work, before dinner. Lying on the floor frees the central nervous system from almost all of the stimuli that evoke habitual response patterns to gravity. In the beginning, subtler sensations will be experienced in the rest position than while standing.

Almost any discomfort you may experience, whether physical such as achiness or tension, or emotional such as feeling angry, sad, frustrated or scared, are probably arising from your conditioning and not from the immediate situation. As the psoas releases, the sensations you experience may also cause you to feel vulnerable. Instead of changing or rearranging your position, try to become more quiet, simply allowing the sensations to circulate freely



through the body. You may notice a stream of images, thoughts and emotions that move through as the sensations appear. Try not to change anything, or be taken by these associations; just keep returning to the qualities of

Lessons From The Garden

by Beth Benjamin

Pregnancy and the Psoas

sensation—not only those inside your body but also those experienced as coming into the body from such impressions as air currents, sunlight, odors, textures, etc., so that a balance begins to occur between what is experienced internally and what is being received.

An alternate position, and one that is good for those who feel it is a strain to allow the legs to be bent, is to find a chair or couch and lie down so that your legs can rest upon it. (see diagram). As your belly grows and you are no longer comfortable on your back, it will be necessary to work in a partially reclined position, supported by pillows. It is important for the spine to be supported evenly from head to coccyx (see diagram).

As your pregnancy progresses, trust your inner voice. You may sense that you should reduce the time to only five or ten minutes maximum.

Pregnancy is a time of growth, of changes, a time of letting go, of starting new. Because the weight of pregnancy helps free the psoas muscle, it can be a time to stimulate a deeper sense of oneself; offering your self and your baby a rich, nourished place for inward growth.

Liz Koch has been working with the psoas muscle for over 10 years, and is the author of The Psoas Book, presently out of print. Formerly on the staff of the Alternative Therapies Unit at San Francisco General Hospital and a University Instructor, Liz is a certified practitioner of Jin Shin Do Acupressure. She currently practices in Santa Cruz on a limited basis plus periodically teaches workshops on the psoas muscle. Liz is the mother of two children and the editor of THE DOULA MAGAZINE.



Photo Credit: Liz Koch

When my children were little, I gave them a "test". I said "Here is a list of the fruits, see if you can put them in order". And they could, because they grew up in a garden where we grew a great percentage of our own food. What delighted me was not that they could make a list, but that they had an internal sense of the changing seasons. They knew the order of nature's parade. Our children grew up in one place and ate mainly from our own garden and orchard rather than from the market. They watched apples grow from apple blossoms and knew that they ripen later than cherries. They understood that plums and apricots last a very short time, which is why we dry and can them or make jam - and it is what makes them so special!

I'm not impressed that we can buy an apple at the grocery store anytime of the year. It makes apples lose something of their nature. For me appleness means autumn with its sun beating on fallen fruit, the release of special vinegary perfume and Halloween - the connections in our mind between tastes, smells and temperatures offer a sensory, non-verbal

awareness of cycles and seasons. These rich associations with the physical growing world makes our lives more complex and interesting.

Growing children benefit enormously by having real life experiences to draw on. In school this is acknowledged by supplementing the "3 R's" with enrichment activities that simulate tasks and projects which would be part of daily life if we still lived in gardens and on farms. I remember watching my three year old helping to thin and weed a carrot bed. As she distinguished a tiny carrot from a tiny seedling I was reminded of the sorting games and puzzles in kindergarten. She developed mental and small motor co-ordination while little fingers plucked out the weeds.

Young children learn so much unconsciously and they may as teenagers act like it's not interesting, yet it is a part of their being. They learn planet Earth from their own physical experience. This in turn prepares them for more intellectual activities such as the study of science and technology. They will recognize their place within the natural world and not separate