



| by Catherine S. Gregory



mayan womb massage

How an ancient technique can prepare your body for conception and ease menstrual cramps

From the onset of puberty through menopause, women are given a sacred reminder of our powerful creative force: the monthly flow from our wombs. Yet all too often in our culture, we don't see menstruation as sacred at all. Instead, we dread it. I used to frequently complain about my menstrual cycles; through years of painful cramps, ovarian cysts, headaches, back pain, and digestive disturbances, I just couldn't find the joy in celebrating

this mark of my womanhood. But after my encounter with a Mayan shaman in Mexico, that all changed.

I was in the Yucatán, attending a yoga retreat, when I booked a traditional healing massage with a local Mayan healer. I had no expectations beforehand, just a desire to unwind and rejuvenate my body, mind, and spirit. What unfolded in that two-hour massage was the most blissful, powerful healing experience of my life. As the shaman's hands moved

rhythmically across my body, he quietly chanted prayers in Mayan, intuitively melting my tensions along the way. He began to work deeply around my navel and lower abdomen. As I relaxed into it, I was suspended in a state of timelessness, cooled by the light breeze coming through the beachside *palapa*. He blew into my navel and continued chanting his prayers. A white light engulfed me. I opened my eyes to see if the bright tropical sun had somehow pen-



etrated the shaded room, but it was dark. I closed my eyes again. The light returned.

In our conversation afterward, I asked the shaman about the work he'd done on my abdomen. Looking into my eyes as he spoke to me in Mayan, he told me, through a translator, that women often sought his help when they had difficulty conceiving a child, and that I would no longer have such problems. But how did he know about my fertility issues? I hadn't mentioned a word about my menstrual difficulties, or my years of never getting pregnant while not using birth control.

A week later, I returned home to a loving reunion with my soon-to-be husband. During our lovemaking, I was once again engulfed by white light. Maybe it was a lucky coincidence, but just weeks after this experience, we discovered that we had conceived a baby.

As our daughter grew inside me, I was compelled to learn more about traditional Mayan healing. I learned that the work the shaman had done on my abdomen and pelvis was an ancient form of Mayan uterine massage—a gentle, external technique used to return the uterus to its proper position within the pelvis. I looked into it more, and eventually found Dr. Rosita Arvigo, of Belize, who was traveling to the US to train practitioners in this ancient modality. Arvigo had apprenticed for ten years with Don Elijo Panti, a renowned Mayan shaman from Belize, to master the same ancient technique I'd experienced in Mexico.

Learning more about the importance of a properly positioned uterus, I began to question many things my doctors had told me about the health of my reproductive system. Since my early 20s, I'd heard from a string of gynecologists that I had a "tipped" (retroverted) uterus. My cervix faced back toward my spine, making for very uncomfortable exams and Pap smears. I'd probed my doctors for more information: *What caused this? Will it affect my ability to become pregnant? Is there anything I can do*

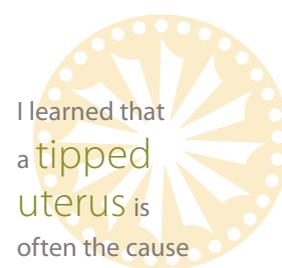
about it? All of my questions were answered with similar reassurances: *Nothing to worry about, Catherine. A tipped uterus is simply a variation of normal. Lots of women have this.*

Yet after stumbling on Arvigo's website, <http://arvigomassage.com>, I learned that a tipped uterus is often the cause of a long list of female complaints, including many of the symptoms I'd suffered over the years. Although none of my doctors had ever associated my problems with the position of my uterus, with just a basic understanding of pelvic anatomy I could now see the connection: A slew of seemingly unrelated symptoms can be attributed to a malpositioned uterus because of the organ's close proximity to the colon, small intestine, and bladder, as well as to the nerves and blood vessels that supply these organs through the lower spine and sacrum.

Arvigo explained to me that the longer the uterus is out of place, the more the musculature and connective tissue can tighten around it, increasing pelvic congestion and stagnation inside the womb. The restricted flow to the uterus of blood, nerve impulses, lymphatic fluid, and energy can lead to painful cramps, the deterioration of the uterine lining, hormonal imbalance, and problems with fertility. The longer the stagnation lasts, the greater the possibility for more complicated symptoms to arise, including ovarian cysts, endometriosis, fibroids, and, possibly, uterine and ovarian cancers.

After her decade with Panti, Arvigo knew that she wanted to share this simple yet essential healing technique with women around the world, and 14 years ago she developed her protocol, the Arvigo Techniques of Maya Abdominal Massage. These combine the ancient Mayan massage she'd learned from Panti with a number of different bodywork techniques, herbal therapies, and dietary and lifestyle changes culled from her earlier trainings in other healing modalities.

I didn't get a chance to receive more Mayan massage before my daughter was conceived.



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Doing the **massage daily** not only helps to ensure the uterus's correct position, it also begins the important process of cultivating a conscious connection between **mind and womb.**

According to Arvigo, a severely displaced uterus, if not corrected prior to pregnancy, often results in painful pregnancies and difficult labor. I experienced this firsthand. After a very difficult 36 hours of labor, I finally, with the help of midwives, delivered my healthy, eight-pound daughter at home. My stalled cervical dilation, my intense back pain, my third-degree tear, and the fact that my coccyx broke during delivery—all were signs that my uterus was still tipped back. That single massage in Mexico hadn't been enough to permanently realign my uterus, though it had allowed the miracles of conception and pregnancy to occur.

Arvigo explains that the uterus is susceptible to displacement by a variety of causes, especially from high-impact activities such as sports, running, jumping, or impacts from falls or automobile accidents. Actions as simple as lifting a heavy object, or repeatedly carrying a child on one hip, can displace the uterus from its proper position in the pelvis, and set off a chain reaction of reproductive and digestive imbalances.

Problems caused by abdominal scar tissue from surgeries or invasive procedures can also be helped by the massage. "For women who have had a cesarean, we can promise better

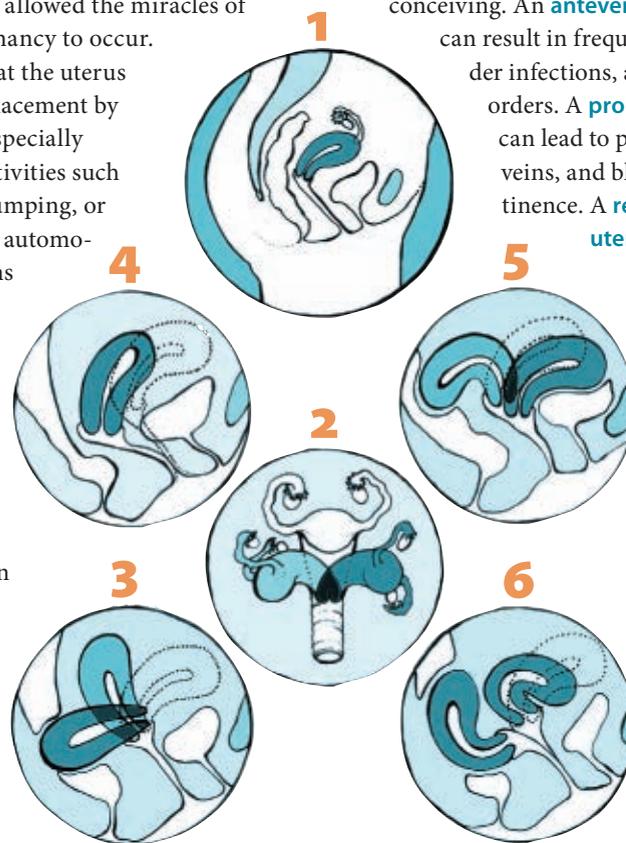
arterial supply to the pelvic organs, better venous drainage from the legs up, less backache, less sciatica, less fluid congestion, and a better possibility for a VBAC [vaginal birth after cesarean]," states Arvigo.

According to Arvigo, there are many ways the uterus can sit improperly in the pelvis (see illustration of uterine displacements). A **side-lying uterus** often affects ovarian function, sometimes leading to ovarian cysts, irregular ovulation or no ovulation (anovulation), hormonal imbalance, and difficulty in conceiving. An **anteverted (forward-lying) uterus**

can result in frequent urination, chronic bladder infections, and other urinary-tract disorders. A **prolapsed (low-lying) uterus** can lead to painful intercourse, varicose veins, and bladder and bowel incontinence. A **retroverted (tipped-back) uterus** can block movement

in the colon and result in chronic constipation, especially around the time of menses. It can also put pressure on the sacral nerves to create low-back pain, which can intensify at the time of menstruation. Uterine flexions (where the fundus is folded) can also occur in any direction, resulting in very painful cramping.

Before I became pregnant again, I wanted to be sure I'd learned this type of uterine self-massage. And so, just before my daughter turned two, I signed up for an Arvigo Self-Care



POSSIBLE UTERINE POSITIONS

1 Proper position of the uterus, centered in the pelvis with space between the bladder and colon **2** Two possible side-lying uterine positions, with the proper position in the center **3** Two different degrees of uterine retroversion **4** Retrocessed uterus with prolapse **5** Two angles of uterine retroflexion **6** Two positions of uterine anteversion (The dotted lines indicate the properly positioned uterus.)



Training. These workshops are designed to empower women to assess the alignment of the uterus and, if it's displaced, to reposition it. Doing the massage daily not only helps to ensure the uterus's correct position, it also begins the important process of cultivating a conscious connection between mind and womb.

For the weekend workshop, I joined a dozen other women at a hot-springs resort in Colorado. The first day, we gathered in a candlelit room, the air thick with the scent of burning copal, a tree resin from Central America. Our instructor informed us that she would be guiding us in a group meditation to help each woman connect with her womb. We lay on blankets in a circle; our eyes closed as a slow drumbeat pulled us into a deep, meditative state. As we moved through the meditation, I felt sad to realize how much negative energy I'd held toward this miraculous organ. After all, every one of us had arrived in this world thanks to a uterus! I now understood the ultimate gift of my womb. Tears flowed, and my heart swelled with gratitude.

A few weeks later, I sat in shock on my bathroom floor, a pregnancy test in my shaking hand. The result was positive. That was it—I was a believer. I immediately signed on for the journey to become an Arvigo practitioner myself.

At home, in a birthing tub, I delivered our 10-pound, 2-ounce son after eight hours of relatively easy labor, this time with no difficulty in dilating, not much back labor, and not a single tear to stitch up. And since I began regular self-massage, my menstrual cycles have been easy and painless. Now that I'm a certified Arvigo practitioner, my clients report the same. I've at last found joy in celebrating the monthly mark of my womanhood, and I'm grateful to help others find their joy, too—one beautiful uterus at a time.

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 ♦ For more on fertility, log on to www.mothering.com/links and see the Web Exclusive "Secondary Infertility," by Nancy Stiefel.

Do-it-yourself MAYAN MASSAGE

Although it's best to work with a trained Arvigo practitioner, anyone can learn the self-massage technique described here. You may experience some temporary changes in menstruation, including a heavier blood flow or an increase in the number of days of flow. This is a sign that your uterus is cleansing. If you become pregnant, stop self-massage and seek the advice of a trained Arvigo practitioner for prenatal massage techniques. To find an Arvigo Techniques Self-Care Training workshop and/or practitioner in your area, go to <http://arvigomassage.com>.

CONTRAINDICATIONS: Do **not** perform Mayan uterine massage on yourself if you are **pregnant**; have had abdominal surgery within the last six months; are under medical treatment for cancer or pelvic infection; wear an intrauterine device (IUD) for birth control; experience any pain or emotional upheavals during the treatment; are taking any painkillers that might mask pain during treatment; or experience a sudden onset of pain.

MAYAN ABDOMINAL SELF-MASSAGE

- Wear loose, comfortable clothes. Empty your bladder. Lie on your back, with support under your knees.
- Relax and breathe deeply for several minutes.
- Bring both hands together onto the pubic bone. Tuck one thumb under the other, with the other eight fingers close together. Fingers should be slightly bent and relaxed so that your hands resemble a hoe.
- Slide your hands off the pubic bone toward your navel, and sink your fingers as deep into the soft flesh as is comfortable.
- On your next exhalation, firmly stroke in an upward motion halfway to your navel. Remember to breathe slowly and exhale with each massage stroke. Repeat this upward movement of your hands, from pubic bone toward the navel, for about two minutes.
- If you experience discomfort, reduce the pressure but continue to massage upward and within your comfort zone. If you experience any tenderness after the massage, give yourself a few days' rest before resuming self-massage using a lighter touch.

—The Arvigo Institute, LLC



Catherine S. Gregory is a certified massage therapist and certified practitioner of the Arvigo Techniques of Maya Abdominal Massage (<http://fertilebeing.com>). She lives in Fort Collins, Colorado, with her husband, Mitchell, her stepson, Kieran (17), and her two miracles of Mayan massage, Ella (8) and Silas (5).