

Health and Fitness in Pregnancy

Therapy Services

Physiotherapy

Your body will change a great deal during your pregnancy. This booklet is designed to provide you with information on the problems that may occur and advice and exercises that you can help you keep fit and well.

How does my body change during pregnancy?

During pregnancy your weight increases and your posture changes this may lead to several problems that could include:

- The pelvic joints don't move smoothly and equally this changes the strength and flexibility of the muscles surrounding these joints makes the pelvis less stable leading to aches and pain. When the pain is in your back it is known as Low Back Pain and when it is in the pelvis Pelvic Girdle Pain (also called Symphysis Pubis Dysfunction). The advice included in this booklet will help you cope with this but if you experience significant pelvic or back pain seek medical advice.
- Your growing baby stretches and weakens your abdominal muscles causing a change in your posture. As your abdominals support your spine this places further strain on your back. You may notice when sitting up in bed that your abdominal muscles "dome" this is called Diastasis Rectus Abdominis.
- The weight of the baby in the pelvis and weakness of the abdominal muscles may cause problems with pelvic floor muscle weakness and urinary leakage, this is known as Stress Incontinence.
- Hormones also affect your circulation leading to changes in the veins. Symptoms may include leg cramps and/ or swelling of the hands and feet. Some women experience numbness and tingling in their hands this is called Antenatal Carpal Tunnel Syndrome.

After the birth of your baby, many of the problems mentioned previously resolve but it is important to remember that you will need to do postnatal exercise to regain muscle strength.

Low back pain and pelvic girdle pain

Low back pain and pelvic pain are common complaints during pregnancy. They occur for a variety of reasons:

- Weight gain causing a strain on joints and a change in your posture
- Previous back or lower limb pain
- Fatigue
- Home or work activities resulting in repetitive lifting and bending
- Descent of the baby into the pelvic cavity in the last four weeks of pregnancy.

All of the above cause strain on the joints of the pelvis and spine and may cause pain in the low back and groin. This may move to the hips, down the legs, into the abdomen or ribs at bra strap level. Initially you may find difficulty with working, turning over in bed, standing on one leg, driving and doing household tasks. You will find that the longer you do something such as walking the more pain you get and when you are tired at the end of the day it is generally worse.

Ways to ease back and pelvic pain

- Avoid activities which cause pain and accept help from friends and family with household tasks.
- Avoid repetitive lifting or bending. If it is related to your work ask your employer for a work place assessment.
- Change positions frequently for example try not to sit for more than 30 minutes at a time.
- Maintain a good posture and achieve a balance of exercise and rest.
- Avoid constipation by eating a balanced diet and drinking fluids.

- Use an ice pack for ten minutes over the painful area. Repeat regularly. Warm baths or heat packs will help with muscle relaxation, massage can also help.
- Your midwife can refer you to a physiotherapist who will assess you and give specific advice and exercises for your problem and a pelvic support belt if appropriate
- Your GP or midwife can advise on medication.

It is the activities that we do every day that can lead to pain and discomfort. Below is advice for different activities and postures.

Standing Posture

Stand with your feet hip width apart facing forward. Check your weight is balanced between each foot with your knees straight not locked. Relax your shoulders down, gently drawing the shoulder blades down and towards each other. Stretch the back of your neck by thinking of lifting the crown of your head towards the ceiling. Holding this posture, gently lift the pelvic floor, drawing your belly button to your spine (as if tightening your belt one notch tighter than usual). Try to maintain this tension when working in a standing position and avoid stooping when doing activities such as washing up. If you work in a standing position it may be useful to lean against a wall, bend your knees and gently tilt your pelvis backwards so your spine flattens to the wall.

Walking

It is important to take regular walks to maintain your fitness. If you have a lot of pain when walking, avoid uneven surfaces such as cobbles and the beach. Try to maintain the upright posture developed in standing, think about “walking tall”, maintaining gentle tension in your pelvic floor and abdominal muscles (belly button to spine) to hold your hips level. Walking up hill requires a stronger contraction through the abdominal muscles to maintain the best possible posture. Don’t allow yourself to “waddle” side to side. When your heel contacts the ground gently squeeze your buttock muscles to help you stay tall.

Bending and Stretching

When picking up objects or doing housework such as loading the washing machine bend the hips and knees not the spine. If you contract the abdominal and pelvic floor muscles as you are bending or reaching this supports the back. Take care not to over stretch and avoid squatting.

Carrying

Carry things close to your body or split the load so it can be carried equally for example use two smaller shopping bags or a rucksack. Try to avoid carrying heavy handbags, the vacuum or toddlers. If you have to lift, get as close as possible to the load to be lifted. Use the strong muscles of the legs to push up with whilst keeping the back straight and drawing in the abdominal and pelvic floor muscles.

Sitting posture

Sit with your feet hip width apart, facing forward and heels positioned under knees. Try to position the hips at a right angle, with weight equal between left and right sit bones. Using a small rolled towel at waist height supports the natural curve of your lower back. Your shoulders should be relaxed with shoulder blades gently pulling back and down towards each other. Stretch the back of your neck by thinking of lifting the crown of your head towards the ceiling and drawing the chin back. Whilst holding this posture, lift the pelvic floor and gently draw belly button to spine. Ensure you sit on seats that give you support; you may need to use cushions to support your spine when relaxing. Avoid sitting on low chairs, with the legs crossed or tucked up sideways on the sofa. Sitting in these positions can make your pain worse.

Getting out of a chair

Shuffle your weight to the front of the chair then lean to bring your nose over your toes before pushing up with the legs to stand. Avoid twisting whilst standing up, especially if holding any type of heavy load.

Sleeping

- Avoid sleeping flat on your back after week sixteen of your pregnancy. Lie on your side and place a small pillow under your bump to give support, with one or two pillows under the top leg to keep it parallel to the ceiling. If one side of your pelvis is more painful than the other, lie with the painful side uppermost. If you wake in pain get up and walk around the house until the pain eases.
- When turning over in bed, bend your knees up towards your hips, keep them together. Turn your head in the direction you want to move and reach your arms over in the same direction. Keep the knees pressed together and roll onto the opposite side. Don't sit up from flat before you roll as you may notice your tummy "doming".
- When getting out of bed, roll onto your side; lower your legs over side at same time as pushing up with your arms. Keep your legs bent to help getting up and contract the abdominal and pelvic floor muscles firmly to assist you.

Relaxation

Practising relaxation during your pregnancy will help you to rest more effectively and comfortably. Often when we are tired and have discomfort we can feel tension. Tension causes an increase in blood pressure, heart rate, and rate of breathing which can lead to feelings of panic and loss of control. Using relaxation can help reduce, or prevent tension from building up and may help you cope better with the pain and feel more in control.

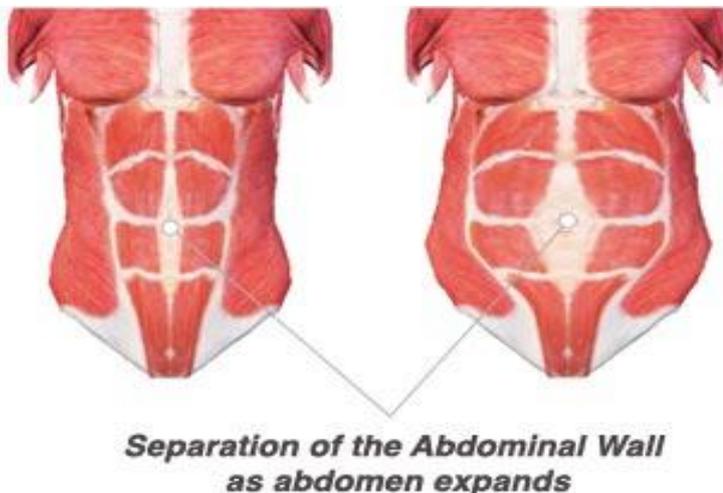
Exercise to help low back and pelvic pain

You can use a combined exercise of the pelvic floor, abdominal and back muscles together which can help ease back and pelvic pain. In standing, lean against a wall with your feet slightly away from the wall and your knees slightly bent. Gently pull in your lower pelvic floor and abdominal muscles and flatten your back against the wall. Hold the contraction for ten seconds and aim to repeat ten times at least three times a day or if you are experiencing back pain.

Diastasis Rectus Abdominis

The abdominal muscle has three layers. The rectus abdominis muscle is the layer under the skin which meets in the midline at the linea alba, which is a fibrous band running from the bottom of the breastbone to the top of the pelvis. This muscle works strongly when coughing and lifting. The obliques are deeper abdominal muscles which allow you to twist and rotate at the waist. Underneath these muscles is the transversus abdominis which acts as a corset stabilising the spine during movement and controlling posture.

During pregnancy the muscles and the linea alba stretch, thin and lengthen over your growing baby, causing weakness and poor control of movement. In the later stages of pregnancy you may notice that as you get out of the bath or as you sit up from lying that your tummy “domes” and when you are walking you want to support the tummy this is called diastasis rectus abdominis. With a severe diastasis (up to 20 cm) the back is at greater risk of strain therefore appropriate exercises from your physiotherapist is important. A small diastasis (3cm) often gets better by itself.



Ways to minimise a diastasis

It is important to avoid heavy lifting or sitting up from lying incorrectly, as this may cause bulging and widening of the muscles. If you have a toddler you must take great care to avoid carrying them on your hip, lifting them and putting them in the car or bath as all these activities can overstretch the abdominal muscles and cause pelvic pain. Avoid high impact exercises such as aerobics; zumba and boot camps also sit ups and advanced abdominal exercises unless instructed. If you find your diastasis bulges during coughing, sneezing and opening your bowels Use your hand to support your abdominal muscles.

Abdominal exercises to help diastasis

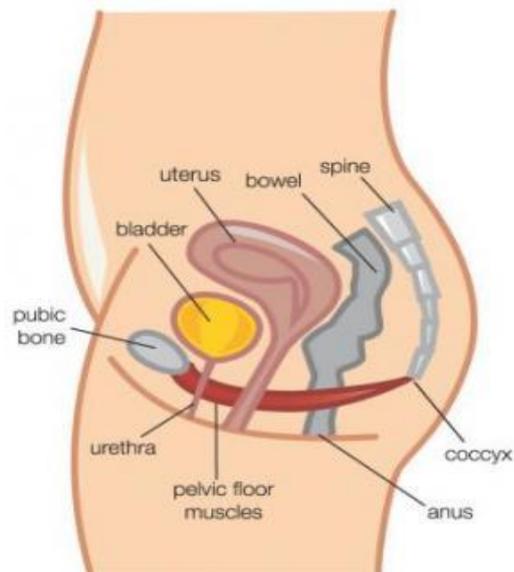
To exercise the abdominal muscles lie on your side with your knees bent placing your hand on the lower part of your tummy under your bump. As you breathe out, gently draw in your lower tummy away from your hand towards your back. Hold for a count of ten continuing to breathe in and out as normal and then relax. Repeat this exercise ten times, three times as day. As you progress you can practice this exercise in sitting or standing. Try to use this muscle during any activity requiring effort, for example vacuuming, shopping or getting up from a chair.

Muscle weakness and stress incontinence

The pelvic floor muscles form a supportive sling within the pelvis. They provide support the pelvic organs, including the womb and your baby. When your pelvic floor muscles are well toned they stop leakage of urine from your bladder and wind or faeces from the bowel. When you pass urine or stools the pelvic floor muscles relax and afterwards they tighten to restore control. They actively squeeze when you laugh or cough to avoid leaking.

The increasing weight of your baby during pregnancy, followed by the delivery, may weaken the pelvic floor. The support it gives is reduced and you may leak urine when you exert yourself this is called stress incontinence.

The Pelvic floor



Ways to help pelvic floor muscle weakness

You should exercise the pelvic floor every day whilst pregnant and for the rest of your life. You should keep relaxed doing your pelvic floor muscles exercises do not hold your breath, or clench your buttocks together. Initially you may find these exercises difficult but with practise they will become easier.

- Sit comfortably or lie down on your back with your knees bent
- Tighten and pull up the muscles around your anus and vagina. Imagine that you are trying to stop yourself from passing wind and at the same time stopping your flow of urine midstream. This squeezes the muscle upwards and forwards
- Firstly try to hold the contraction for approximately ten seconds then release. This is a slow contraction; you should aim to do at least ten of these slow contractions, three times per day

- Secondly do ten fast contractions by tightening your pelvic floor muscles as quickly as you can. Hold the contraction for one second before relaxing. Repeat this exercise ten times three times a day also.
- When you are confident that you are doing these exercises correctly you will be able to progress to doing them in sitting, standing or walking.
- Get used to always tightening your pelvic floor muscles before you cough, sneeze, or move something heavy.
- Constipation is common in pregnancy, and straining to move your bowels may also weaken the pelvic floor. To prevent this drink 2 litres of fluid per day and Include lots of fresh fruit, vegetables and bran in your diet.

Antenatal Carpal Tunnel Syndrome

During the later stages of pregnancy you may notice that you are retaining fluid and that you have swollen hands and ankles. A fibrous band across the wrist protects blood vessels, nerves and muscles as they pass to the hand. The area beneath this band is called the carpal tunnel. Swelling under this band causes compression of the nerve and blood vessels, which supply the muscles, and skin. This gives symptoms that may include:

- Swelling
- Tingling or pins and needles affecting the thumb, palm, and fingers of one or both hands
- Numbness
- Night pain
- Hot and sweaty hands and mottled in appearance
- Difficulty holding/gripping objects
- Pain/swelling in the forearms.

Please note if the swelling becomes severe, affects your face or gives you headaches you must contact your midwife immediately or if out of hours the MAU (Midwifery Assessment Unit).

Ways to help the symptoms

- Remove all rings, watches and tight clothing which may restrict circulation
- When resting keep your hands elevated on pillows and clench/release your fists several times to improve the circulation
- If your hands are particularly swollen use an ice pack or plunge your hands in to a bowl of iced water for up to ten minutes
- Use resting splints at night to keep your hands in a good position. These can be provided by your physiotherapist. If you have pain in only one hand, avoid sleeping on that side
- At work avoid taking weight through your hands and keeping your wrists bent for long periods. Keep your wrists in a neutral position when using computers or working on a cashiers till. You can use your splints throughout the day to support your wrist.

Leg Cramps

These are due to changes in body chemistry and changing pressures in the abdomen. If severe your doctor may be able to give you medication to help, so do ask. Some women find that it helps to exercise their feet before going to bed: circle the feet at least ten times briskly in each direction. Try stretching the legs out straight and pulling your feet and ankles hard up towards you, keeping them pulled up for a few moments, just before you go to sleep

Swollen ankles and varicose veins

Rest, lying down with your whole legs supported in a raised position. From about four months of pregnancy, it is more comfortable for you and your baby if you can avoid lying flat on your back; make sure that your head and shoulder are supported by pillows in a slightly raised position. Vigorously exercise your feet up and down for at least thirty seconds at a time. Avoid standing for long periods and consider wearing support tights.

Ribflare

This is the name given to discomfort over your lower ribs that is caused by your growing baby lifting your ribs up and out from their normal position. Try not to sit for long periods especially in the car and avoid sitting on low chairs. Stand without leaning backwards, keeping your ribs forward over your hips this shortens your abdominals and helps them support your spine. Stretching exercises will help especially if you gently contract your abdominal muscles, try lifting your arm on the painful side to the ceiling then bend sideways away from the ache. Sleeping on the unaffected side with your arm stretched forwards on a pillow.

Can I exercise during pregnancy?

Mild to moderate exercise is good for you and your developing baby. Low impact exercises are excellent ways of maintaining and improving your fitness for example brisk walking; swimming; aqua-natal classes; static cycling or low impact aerobics. If you have not exercised regularly before becoming pregnant start slowly, build up and avoid taking up new strenuous types of exercise. It is advisable to stick to familiar activities and remember that as your pregnancy progresses it is natural to slow down.

If you regularly participate in contact and competitive sports it is advisable to discontinue after four months of pregnancy. If you have any health problems during your pregnancy speak to your GP before exercising.

Do:

- Exercise regularly, three times per week
- If you go to an exercise, pilates or yoga class inform your teacher you are pregnant
- Include a warm up and cool down and exercise for up to 30 minutes
- Practise relaxed breathing when exercising
- Drink plenty of water to avoid dehydration.
- Increase your calorie intake to match the energy you use.

- Listen to your body – stop exercising if you are uncomfortable, feeling tired or unwell
- Consider using a Gym Ball to sit on as it promotes good posture and can help prevent backache.

Don't:

- Exercise lying on your back after four months of pregnancy as it compresses the major blood vessels
- Bounce or over-stretch as this may injure your ligaments.
- Increase your heart rate to over 140 beats per minute
- Hold your breath or maintain a static position for a long time when exercising
- Get too hot or breathless or exercise if it causes you pain.

If you feel you are not coping with your problems, ask your doctor or midwife to refer you to a physiotherapist.

Further advice is available by contacting:
Physiotherapy on 0191 2825484 (9.00 – 4.00pm)

Compiled by Julie Ellis April 2013

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