Managing Back Pain During Pregnancy

by ALISON RICHARDS

Back Pain During Pregnancy: What's the Cause?

Many women have back pain during pregnancy, and I suffered with it badly when I was expecting my younger son. It is estimated that an anywhere between 50% to 75% of pregnant women will suffer from back pain during one of the three trimesters of pregnancy.

Why Does Pregnancy Cause Back Pain?

Back pain in pregnancy can be caused by a variety of reasons.

Bodily Changes

First off, weight gain and change of body features, such as larger breasts and belly, can change a woman’s center of gravity, resulting in a different body posture. Also, fluctuating hormones, namely estrogen and relaxin, relax the ligaments around the pelvic area in preparation for the birth. As pregnancy progresses the muscles stretch around the back and abdomen, which puts more strain on the joints.

Stress

Stress and anxiety during pregnancy can result in pain, particularly in the upper back and shoulder area, where you might hold a lot of tension. Also, pain can often be brought on by overactivity or prolonged inactivity.

Muscle Strain

Pre-existing weak core and pelvic floor muscles will become laxer during pregnancy, leading to poor posture and back pain. Carrying a heavy baby or multiple babies can increase back pain due to the extra strain put on the pelvic area.

Previous Back Pain Symptoms

Women who have suffered from previous back pain prior to pregnancy are more likely to have pregnancy-related back pain.

Different Types of Back Pain

There are three stages of pregnancy known as trimesters: Weeks 1 to 12 make up the first trimester, weeks 13 to 26 are known as the second trimester and the third trimester lasts from week 27 to the birth (usually 40 weeks).

Back pain can occasionally be felt in the first trimester, but it is far more common in the second and third trimesters. Some women can also experience back pain afterwards, particularly around the coccyx (coccydynia)

and sacrum if it was a traumatic or difficult birth that required intervention. This is known as post-partum back pain. Pregnancy back pain is generally defined as either posterior pelvic pain or lower back/lumbar pain.

Posterior Pelvic Pain

Posterior pelvic pain is felt very low in the back, generally giving a deep muscular ache in the buttocks. This pain can also be felt anywhere across the entire pelvic area radiating out from the centre of your back, and sometimes reaching the back of a patient's thighs.

The pain may be exacerbated by climbing the stairs, making the movement from sit to stand, getting in and out of a car, rolling over in bed, a random twist of the body, adopting a prolonged fixed posture, such as leaning over a keyboard, and even constipation.

Lower Back or Lumbar Pain

Lumbar back pain is still in the lower back area but more focused around your center spine from the waist and upwards. This may feel more like a normal backache. This type of back pain can be brought on by prolonged sitting, standing, or lifting something incorrectly or frequently.

It is sometimes confused with sciatica, especially after long periods of standing, but that condition causes additional pains down the leg.

Working Through Pregnancy With Back Pain

My own back pain was most pronounced when I was at work, sitting at a computer all day. Pregnant ladies who are on their feet all day can experience back pain as a result too. If this happens to you, then it is a health and safety issue. You should be assessed, and measures should be put in place to alleviate the pain.

Specialized equipment is available, which helps posture and avoids strain on the areas affected. For example, office chairs can be adjusted to ensure you are sitting in the right position. It is so important to be in the correct position, particularly during pregnancy. If you work from home, then you must ensure that you are not sitting at the dining table with a normal chair; your workspace must conform to the same standards as if you were in the office.

How to Cope With Pregnancy-Related Back Pain

Thankfully, although back pain causes great discomfort and mental stress, there are lots of things that you can do yourself to relieve the pain that does not include taking drugs that could be passed onto your baby:

- Adopt a good posture when sitting, standing and walking.
- Maintain a healthy diet, including supplements if needed.
- Continue to exercise. There are classes specifically for pregnancy, such as aqua-natal keep fit and prenatal yoga.
- Exercise your pelvic floor daily.
- Use hot and cold compresses, such as hot water bottles and ice packs.
- Practice good rest and sleep hygiene.
- Sleep on a firm mattress.
- Treat yourself to a pregnancy massage.
- Have a warm, relaxing bath.
- Wear flat, comfortable shoes.
- Try a TENS machine.

If you have not had as much relief from the above methods as you would like, then perhaps a physical therapist, chiropractor or osteopath may be able to give a diagnosis and provide a set of exercises for you to do at home.

Talk to Your Doctor

Seek help from your employer if you experience pain at work. Your human resources team should have a policy in place that provides guidance for the support you are entitled to.

If you are concerned, you should always seek medical advice, particularly if pain is severe or prolonged. You should also see your doctor if you experience loss of bladder or bowel function, blood from the vagina, bladder or bowel, fever, dizziness, a loss of feeling from the waist down, or a pain under the ribs.