

Pelvic Pain during Pregnancy

This information sheet is to give information to pregnant women who are experiencing pain around the pelvis whether that is at the front, over the symphysis and/or in the lower back, over the sacroiliac joints.

Classic signs and symptoms of this condition are:

- Pain in the front of the pelvis
- Pain in the lower back
- Pain in the groin
- Pain over the inner thighs
- Pain between the legs
- Clicking/grinding over the front of the pelvis

Women often describe having difficulty doing the following activities:

- Walking distances (often a “waddling” gait is common)
- Climbing up and down the stairs
- Getting in and out of the car
- Climbing in and out of the bath
- Turning over in bed
- Standing for long periods
- Dressing

Women with pelvic girdle pain have a reduced tolerance to activities such as standing, sitting and walking. Symptoms can change in location and severity and will vary between women and pregnancies. Many pelvic problems are dismissed as the “normal aches and pains” of pregnancy, but you can adopt lifestyle changes and carry out simple exercises to reduce pain and improve function. With appropriate advice and treatment the discomfort can significantly improve.

What causes the Pain?

During pregnancy there are a number of changes to the body which affect the pelvis. From about 12 weeks, the body produces hormones which alter tissue sensitivity and flexibility. The pregnant pelvis adapts to increase tilt and width of the pubic symphysis and sacroiliac joints. This is completely normal in preparation for the birth of the baby. The pelvis needs to adjust to changing forces, a growing baby, muscles and tissues stretching and different

postures, but it is able to remain robust throughout pregnancy and there is no proven correlation between hormone levels (such as relaxin) and pelvic girdle pain.

Whilst the changes above are normal, for some people, inflammation and tissue sensitivity can increase in the body. Our nervous system, pelvis and the associated tissues can react in a protective way and contribute to pain. In addition, changing energy levels which pregnancy tends to bring, as well as the stresses and strains of life, our emotional well-being and quality of sleep, can all contribute to how well our body can adjust to these changes. Collectively these can influence our experience of pain.

There is emerging evidence that problems can be improved by understanding pain mechanisms, life-style counselling and daily movement strategies. Exercise has been shown to help reduce PGP and we know that it is important to continue to move and exercise where possible during pregnancy, for both maternal and fetal health benefits.

You can encourage good muscle function around the pelvis which together with some sensible lifestyle changes can help to reduce your pelvic pain. Movement is safe and beneficial (unless you have been specifically told otherwise), and you should move in a way that is comfortable for you.

Top Tips

- Adjust your position regularly whether it be sitting or standing.
- Avoid twisting movements if uncomfortable
- Turn over in bed steadily. You may find that having your knees together is helpful.
- Carry shopping equally in each hand and carry babies in front of you, not on your hip. Avoid carrying very heavy things when possible.
- Place a plastic bag on the car seat so that you can slide around out of the car may be helpful.
- Wear low heels and shock absorbing footwear.
- You may wish to try going upstairs one step at a time if you are really struggling with stairs and plan your day so that you can reduce the amount of times you have to use them.
- Use anti-slip mat in the bath/shower- a slip can be sore. Often the shower can be more comfortable as it is easier to step in and out of.
- Cuddle children sitting on your lap rather than lifting them when possible.

- Avoid things that you find aggravate YOUR symptoms (this may be activities such as squatting, vacuuming or other house hold chores. Listen to your body and try to adjust things accordingly).
- Rest frequently throughout the day. Lie down for a short time if possible to regain your energy levels. You may find this to be especially beneficial from the afternoon time onwards when your energy levels are dipping.
- Adapt strokes when swimming if it causes you trouble. Some people find that breaststroke can aggravate symptoms.
- When sleeping/resting on your side, you may find that using a small pillow between your knees gives some additional comfort and support and a soft towel or blanket underneath your hip.
- Perform stretching exercises if they feel comfortable for you.
- If walking is a problem, take smaller steps and avoid rushing when possible.
- Accept help from your partner/family/friends particularly in stressful postures or strenuous shopping trips and when you are tired / low in energy.
- Sit down for tasks you would normally stand for e.g. preparing food, ironing, dressing etc.

Exercises

The use of exercise is important to improve muscle function and ease discomfort. You should practice exercises regularly, aim for 3-4 sessions a day.

Pelvic Floor Exercises

A pelvic floor muscle contraction is performed by closing and drawing up your front and back passage. Imagine you are trying to stop yourself from passing wind and at the same time trying to stop your flow of urine. The feeling is one of 'squeeze and lift'. In the beginning it may be easier to do the exercises in lying, but you can progress them to sitting and standing.

There are two types of exercises you should do;

1. Quick and strong

Squeeze as hard as you can and then relax. Rest a second and then repeat up to 10 times.

2. Endurance

Squeeze and hold for up to 10 seconds. You must feel the muscle relax after each contraction. Aim to repeat it as many times as you can, building up to a maximum of 10 times.

- DO NOT** Pull in your stomach excessively
- DO NOT** Squeeze your legs together
- DO NOT** Tighten your buttocks
- DO NOT** Hold your breath.

You must aim to do these exercises at **least 3 times a day**. Generally, it takes 3-6 months to get a muscle really strong again. Do not do so many that the muscle begins to ache, remember it is quality not quantity!



Deep Stomach Muscles (Transversus Abdominis)

In sitting/standing/lying place your hands around the lower part of your bump below the belly button. Breathe in gently. As you breathe out pull the lower part of the stomach, drawing your 'bump' in towards your spine, away from your hands. Do not move your back. With the muscle held, continue to breathe normally.

Aim for hold for 3-5 breath cycles. Repeat 5-10 times.

Pelvic Tilting

In tall sitting, standing or on all fours, arching your lower back and stick your chest out. Then, slump, rounding your spine and relaxing your shoulders. Repeat 5-10 times.



Sit to Stand Exercise



Begin sitting in a chair or on the edge of your bed. Slowly stand from the chair, and then slowly return to sitting. Try to keep the movement smooth and controlled. Try to stand without the help of your arms by crossing them across your chest.

Remember:

- Use the deep stomach muscles and pelvic floor muscles by engaging them before and during the activities that give you discomfort. This action can help support the pelvis and prevent pain.
- Exercise within your pain limits. Be guided by your pain as to what you can do.
- Be mindful of the specific movements that you find uncomfortable and adapt them if possible. Some ladies find movements involving knees apart more troublesome, but this isn't the case for all.
- Build up exercise slowly so you can reduce the likelihood of flare ups.
- Antenatal exercise classes run by those qualified are a good way to exercise. Always tell instructors about your pelvic pain.

There are many types of Maternity Support Belts available to buy which in addition to the guidance above, you may find helpful. You can ask your Physiotherapist for advice. All supports need to be fitted correctly, so follow instructions carefully.

Sleeping

Being comfortable at night and getting a good night's rest can make such a difference when coping with pelvic pain.

- Speak to your GP/Specialist about painkillers if required.
- Use a pillow or folded towels between your knees when lying on your side
- You may benefit from a pillow under your "bump" too.
- Turn over gradually. You may find it helpful to keep your legs fairly close together.

Sexual Relationships

Sex is often affected by pelvic pain as it is often difficult to move comfortably. Try different positions and avoid positions where discomfort increased. You are not causing yourself any harm by continuing to have sex if you do.



The Birth

Many women successfully give birth without any intervention despite having pelvic pain. To achieve this, discuss the options with your Midwife and Physiotherapist in the Antenatal period. It may be advisable to record that you have pelvic pain in your obstetric folder and also in your birth plan.

You may benefit from positions during labour that do not put undue pressure on the pelvis. If your Midwife is aware of the problem she can ensure that you are not kept in uncomfortable positions for long periods of time. Generally trying to keep more active during labour and avoiding very prolonged postures can be helpful.

Some helpful positions to consider are:

- Kneeling in an upright position, supporting the upper body on a beanbag or chair or pillows
- On hands and knees
- Side lying with the upper leg supported by pillows
- Standing with the upper body leaning forward on a bed/support.
- Squatting with back straight and supported

If you have an assisted delivery (ventouse or forceps) or have to have your feet placed in stirrups it may be best to move both legs together and rotate your hips outwards as they are bent up. This is better than just separating them. An epidural is not necessary but if you want one pelvic pain won't prevent you. It is rare to need a Caesarean section because of pelvic pain. Gather as much information before making decisions and remember it is a major operation.

Remember throughout your labour to:

- Allow the sacrum at the back of the pelvis to move freely, avoiding lying on your back for long periods
- Encourage effective contractions by making sure your back is straight and upright
- You may wish to be mindful of the comfortable distance between your knees. You can make a note of this in your notes or birth plan. Whilst you have pain relief relieving the discomfort you will not automatically remember. Perhaps your Birth Partner could help to remind everyone of the situation also.

Post Natal Period

Often immediately after the birth women find that they begin to feel more comfortable. For others it may take a little longer. It is essential to continue to work on the stability exercises to ensure you are making a steady recovery.

Very few women need continuing physiotherapy treatment after the birth. If you continue to have issues after birth please refer yourself to physiotherapy. Remember good posture when you are breastfeeding, lifting and changing the baby and pushing prams.

Future Pregnancies

It is not inevitable that you will experience pelvic pain in any further pregnancies. You may wish to allow you and your body time to recover before embarking on another pregnancy. Remember that "prevention is better than the cure" and that if you are planning another child, prepare your body by beginning the exercises early. You may well find with a little foresight your symptoms do not reappear or are not as severe in subsequent pregnancies.

Active Mums Antenatal Care Programme

West Suffolk midwives and Abbeycroft Leisure are running FREE classes for pregnant women who would like to take part in exercise, with advice about a healthier pregnancy. The programme runs over 6 weeks at various locations across Suffolk (Haverhill, Bury St Edmunds, Brandon, Sudbury, Newmarket, Mildenhall and Hadleigh). The sessions involve guided gentle exercise with a pre-post natal trained instructor. During one of the sessions you will be able to chat to a women's health physiotherapist about any specific pelvic floor or pregnancy related pelvic pain issues.

Click on the link below to register:

[Active Mums | Abbeycroft Leisure \(acleisure.com\)](http://acleisure.com)

