

The Centre For Women's Reproductive Care

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Common Discomforts and Symptoms during Pregnancy

Symptoms of discomfort due to pregnancy vary from person-to-person. Many women (and sometimes their medical carers) become alarmed at certain symptoms that, in the non pregnant state, would signal a disease process. In many cases they can be explained as a positive adaptation of your body to the needs of your baby. The following are some common discomforts. However, each mother-to-be may experience symptoms differently or not at all:

nausea and vomiting

About half of all pregnant women experience nausea and sometimes vomiting in the first trimester -- also called morning sickness because symptoms are most severe in the morning. Some women may have nausea and vomiting throughout the day and for longer in pregnancy. The cause of morning sickness may be due to the changes in hormone levels during pregnancy. Morning sickness seems to be aggravated by smells, stress, travelling, and certain foods high in protein and fat. To lessen the symptoms try eating cold rather than cooked food and small meals several times a day. A diet high in complex carbohydrates (such as whole wheat bread, pasta, bananas, and potatoes) may also help reduce the severity of the nausea.

Other tips include the use of ginger or Vitamin B6 (Pyridoxine) 50 mg three times daily.

If these measures do not work then there are a number of drugs that can be safely used for the control of nausea during pregnancy. A few women require admission to hospital and rehydration with intravenous fluids. Contact your doctor or the hospital if you reach a state where you are passing very little urine.

fatigue

This is a very common and normal symptom of pregnancy and usually does not mean that you are deficient in iron or some other nutrient. It is simply due to the sedating effects of the pregnancy hormone called progesterone and its Nature=s means of getting you to slow down and turn a little of your normal energy expenditure into growing a baby (and a placenta, some uterine growth and some fat stores.

Sometimes anaemia is the underlying cause of the fatigue. Anaemia is a reduction in the oxygen carried through the bloodstream by red blood cells. A simple blood test performed at the first antenatal visit will check for anaemia and thyroid abnormalities.

breathlessness

Breathlessness is a common symptom in pregnancy. The depth of breathing increases by about 40% during pregnancy and this causes a sensation of breathlessness. Partly this is due to your body having to breathe harder to blow off waste carbon dioxide that your baby produces and passes into your bloodstream via the placenta. Your body resets its basal breathing rate and this can give symptoms of breathlessness. Other factors later in pregnancy include the bulk of the pregnant uterus pressing up onto the diaphragm that give you less room..

If breathlessness is accompanied by cough or chest pains, or you have associated episodes of faintness and collapse then you should seek urgent medical advice. Asthma sufferers should ensure that their asthma is well controlled at the beginning of pregnancy. Do continue to use your inhalers throughout pregnancy. They are safe and will not damage the baby whereas a bad asthma attack might reduce the baby's oxygen supply. If you smoke, give up now.

constipation and piles

Your bowels become lazy when you are pregnant. This is in response to the hormones of pregnancy that relax all smooth muscle including those responsible for intestinal and bowel activity. In early pregnancy this may result in abdominal distension that is often mistaken for the enlarging womb. If you are taking an iron supplement then this can cause constipation as well. Make sure that your diet includes plenty of fibre found in fruit, vegetables, high bread and breakfast cereals. To make all the fibre soft in your bowel you need to drink plenty of fluids. A simple laxative like Metamucil or a bowel motion softener like Coloxyl may occasionally be required. Avoid stimulant laxatives like Senna because they can stimulate the womb as well.

Because of the bulk of the womb in the pelvis, its rich blood supply and the tendency to constipation some women develop

piles (haemorrhoids). These occur when you open your bowels and some of the lining of the bowel is pushed out. It may bleed or be painful but is rarely dangerous. If possible push the piles back into the anal canal. Some simple ointment from the chemist may be necessary if they are inflamed. The piles will usually settle after pregnancy. Try to avoid straining on the toilet.

varicose veins

Varicose veins -- swollen, purple veins -- are common in the legs and around the vaginal opening during late pregnancy. In most cases, varicose veins are caused by the increased pressure on the legs and the pelvic veins, and by the increased blood volume. There is no simple solution except to take pressure of the relevant areas by resting. Supportive hosiery (stockings) are useful for some women if they have to spend long hours on their feet. You may require professional help in the fitting of such stockings.

Varicose veins usually improve dramatically when the pregnancy is over.

heartburn and indigestion

Heartburn and indigestion are caused by relaxation of the natural pressure valves and this is a side effect of those hormones that relax the uterus and prevent it from emptying before its time. These symptoms can be prevented or reduced by eating smaller meals throughout the day and by avoiding lying down shortly after eating. Sometimes it is desirable to remain propped up in bed when you sleep at night. Any simple antacid is generally safe to use but wise to check with your pharmacist for a suitable product.

abdominal pains

Abdominal pains might always represent the onset of labour. Bear this in mind if you are in the latter third of your pregnancy and the pain is coming at regular intervals. A sharp pain low on the right or left that may occur with movements are often due to stretching of the ligaments that support the uterus. These are not serious.

Some women (usually those that have had a baby before) experience quite severe discomfort low down where the pubic bones meet in the mid-line. Usually these bones are held tight together by a strong ligament but in pregnancy this softens and stretches to make more space in the pelvis. This can cause unpleasant discomfort and is usually worse on walking and exercise as the pubic bones move relative to one another. No treatment other than rest is necessary and this will settle after pregnancy.

A few women develop an unpleasant pain and altered skin sensation in the upper abdomen just below the rib cage, more commonly on the right. This is a form of nerve entrapment that usually settles over a period of weeks.

If abdominal pain is severe or accompanied by bleeding then always seek medical advice. Although rare, problems like appendicitis, gall stone disease and bleeding into the womb can be the cause.

bleeding gums

Gums may become more spongy as blood flow increases during pregnancy, causing them to bleed easily. A pregnant woman should continue to take care of her teeth and gums and go to the dentist for regular checkups. This symptom usually disappears after pregnancy.

pica

Pica is a rare craving to eat substances other than food, such as dirt, clay, or coal. Many women are too ashamed to admit that they have eaten such strange things but it rarely results in any harm. Why not just check with your doctor if you have been a victim of this?

swelling or fluid retention

Swelling is common during pregnancy, particularly during warm weather. Many years ago it was shown that most women with swelling have bigger and healthier babies than women who have little or no noticeable swelling. It is only when the swelling is associated with high blood pressure or protein in the urine that a condition called preeclampsia exists. This can be a serious problem and it is one of the main reason that women undergo regular checkups with a doctor during pregnancy.

skin changes

Due to fluctuations in hormone levels, including hormones that stimulate pigmentation of the skin, brown, blotchy patches may occur on the face, forehead, and/or cheeks. This is often fades or disappears soon after delivery.

Pigmentation may also increase in the skin surrounding the nipples. A dark line frequently appears down the middle of

the abdomen. Skin itching is common affecting up to 40% of women at some stage during pregnancy. Sometimes it begins in stretch marks and then spreads all over the body. Sometimes skin itching can indicate more serious problems, so you should discuss this with your doctor.

Stretch marks

Pinkish stretch marks may appear on the abdomen, breasts, thighs, or buttocks. Stretch marks are generally caused by a rapid increase in weight, and the marks usually fade after pregnancy. Vitamin E creams may help with *candella asiatica* or “gotu kola”. These will not be as prominent if you massage your abdomen early in the second trimester with creams

thrush

A pregnant woman is more susceptible to thrush which is a yeast infections. Thrush is characterized by a thick, whitish discharge from the vagina and itching. It is easily treated with antifungal agents that can be bought over the counter. Consult your chemist and be prepared to use the cream with the intravaginal applicator if your doctor gives you the okay. Always complete the course and be prepared to use it again if symptoms recur. Sometimes a number of treatments are required but always discuss this problem with your doctor.

congested or bloody nose

During pregnancy, the lining of the nose receives more blood, often making it more congested or a stuffy. The use of nasal decongestants is not recommended. Small blood vessels in the nose can bleed easily and only rarely does this indicate an underlying increase in blood pressure.

backache

Backache is common. In pregnancy your ligaments soften and muscles relax and this contributes to the discomfort. Often the pain is worse at night. Attention to posture, regular exercise, your bed or mattress and simple pain relief like paracetamol may all help. If particularly severe then gentle physiotherapy or advice about exercise and posture may be necessary. Because of the softening of ligaments and the ability of your joints to move abnormally it is not advisable to seek manipulation from a chiropractor during pregnancy. These professionals however may be of help with more gentle treatment and advice. Aquatic exercise allows for good aerobic exercise without the fear of falling. Aquasize is offered at CHHC and at RPS. If you have a fever check or burning urine then with your doctor that the back pain is not due to a urinary infection. Towards the end of pregnancy lower back pain may become worse as the baby's head moves into the pelvis and many women experience low back discomfort at the beginning of labour.

dizziness

Dizziness during pregnancy is a common symptom, which may be caused by:

- X low blood pressure due to the uterus compressing major vessels
- X low blood sugar
- X quickly moving from a sitting position to a standing position

Pregnant woman should avoid lying flat on her back for any length of time. Furthermore she is advised to stand up slowly and hold on to the walls and other stable structures for support and balance. Don't go too long without food and use complex carbohydrates rather than sugars and glucose to get your blood sugar levels up.

headaches

Hormonal changes may be the cause of headaches during pregnancy, especially during the first half. Rest, proper nutrition and increased fluid and salt intake may help to alleviate headache. If headaches are troublesome, paracetamol is safe to take and will not harm the baby.

pins and needles

Swelling of the soft tissue at the wrist can put pressure on one of the nerves going into the hand. This is called carpal tunnel syndrome. This may result in unpleasant sensations of pins and needles or numbness in the hand, often at night. It may help to keep your hands high when you sleep. If the discomfort is unbearable it is worth seeing your doctor to discuss treatment options. Wrist splints may help and exceptionally an injection or operation to relieve the pressure on the nerve is required. If symptoms are mild we would encourage you to wait until the pregnancy is over as the condition usually settles.

Some women develop similar symptoms at other places such as the outer thigh (*meralgia paraesthetica*) where a nerve is trapped at the top of the leg. Again, finding a comfortable position helps. This nerve is pinched when you stand or walk so lying down with

our hip flexed may help.