

Information for patients

Back Care in Pregnancy

Department of Physiotherapy



Many women experience back and pelvic pain during their pregnancy. This pain can vary in intensity and duration from woman to woman. The pain can increase with every day activities such as bending down, lifting objects, twisting, prolonged sitting or standing. Some women also experience pain radiating from the back into the buttocks, thighs and legs.

This leaflet gives you some advice on how to support your back and lessen the pain.

What causes back pain in pregnancy?

- The release of a hormone called Relaxin early in your pregnancy causes an increase in the mobility of the joints in your body, especially the pelvic joints.
- The additional weight you gain during pregnancy causes extra stress on your joints. The average weight gain during pregnancy is 12-15 kg (1.5 - 2 stone).
- The centre of gravity of your body moves forward as the abdomen enlarges and so there is a tendency for you to want to lean backwards. This postural change puts stress on the back muscles.
- Tiredness during pregnancy can lead to poor posture and back pain.
- Your tummy muscles and pelvic floor muscles become weaker as they stretch and therefore give less support to your back and pelvis.

Are there any tests to confirm the diagnosis of back pain in pregnancy?

The diagnosis of back pain can be reached based on the symptoms you experience.

What can I do to help look after my back?

It is very important to have a good posture.

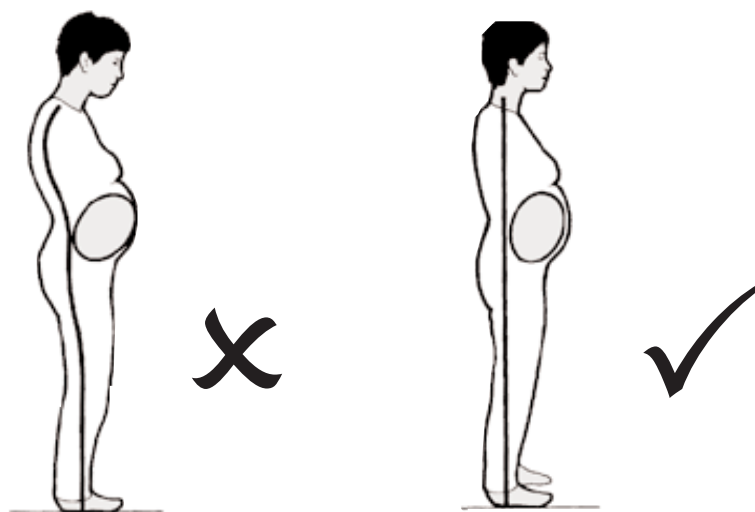
A good posture will automatically work your lower tummy, pelvic floor and back muscles. This will protect your back while you are standing, sitting and doing every day activities.

The following pictures show you how to do this.

Standing

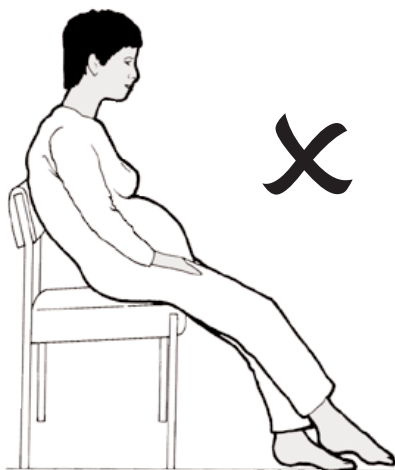
- Stand up tall and feel your lower tummy muscles tighten a little bit.
- Imagine a piece of string pulling you up from the top of your head.
- Relax your shoulders and breathe normally.
- Your weight should be equally distributed on both your feet,
- Try to avoid standing with your weight on one foot, leaning on one side.

Practice this correct posture as often as you can.



Sitting

- Do sit with your bottom to the back of the chair so that your back is well supported by the chair.
- Do use a small cushion to support your back, but do not make your back arch.
- Do try to keep your feet flat on the floor or on a small stool.
- Your back is less likely to ache if you change your position regularly.
- Avoid slouching as this puts more strain on your back.
- Avoid crossing your legs and feet.
- Avoid leaning to one side of the chair or putting your feet up on your chair.
- Practice the correct sitting posture as often as you can.



Lifting

- Even when you are not pregnant, lifting things incorrectly can cause backache.
- To lift something as safely as possible, put one foot in front of the other with your toes facing forward, keep your back straight and bend your knees as you reach down.
 - Hold the object firmly keeping it close to your body,
 - Gently tighten your pelvic floor muscles and the tummy muscles, breathe out and keep the back straight as you stand up.
 - Avoid twisting your body as you come up.
- Take care when you lift small children into the car.
- Avoid lifting heavy or awkward things, and moving furniture.
- Avoid bending forward from the hips to pick something up as in diagram below.



Sleeping positions

As your size and weight changes during pregnancy you may find it uncomfortable to sleep on your back.

These pictures give you some ideas about different sleeping positions that might make you more comfortable.

- **On your side**

Lie on your side with a pillow between your knees. A pillow behind your back, or under your tummy may also be useful.



- **In three quarters lying**

In this position your top leg is supported by a pillow and one arm is behind your back.



- **On your back**

We do not recommend sleeping flat on your back if it is uncomfortable. Put extra pillows behind you to raise your head, shoulders and upper back. Another pillow under your thighs will push your back down onto the bed and may make you more comfortable.



Getting off and on the bed

- Bend your knees
- Gently tighten your tummy and pelvic floor muscles and roll over with a straight back onto your side.
- Swing your legs over the side of the bed and use your arms to push yourself into a sitting position.
- Do the reverse to get onto the bed.
- If you struggle to move in bed like this, you may find it easier to turn under onto your hands and knees.



What about the housework?

The advice described here will help you to support your back during and after your pregnancy.

- **Ironing**

Make sure the ironing board is the right height so that you are not bending forward. Stand with your feet comfortably apart.

Avoid standing still for long periods.

- **Cleaning the bath and making the beds**

Kneel on the floor to clean the bath or make the bed. Try to avoid too much bending down.

- **Vacuuming**

Take care not to reach forward too much or twist your body.

Wheel the vacuum cleaner from room to room rather than lifting it.

Avoid carrying the vacuum up and down the stairs if possible.

- **Shopping**

Get someone to help you to do the shopping. Avoid pushing the trolley or loading the car if possible. Put your shopping into two small bags, rather than one large bag, and carry one bag in each hand.

Posture is very important. If you do any task that hurts your back you should stop doing that task.

What about your job?

Once you have told your employer that you are pregnant you should be given a risk assessment. Keep your employer informed about any aches and pains you may have during your pregnancy.

Is there anything else that will help my back?

The following exercises will help to support your back:

1. Strengthen your pelvic floor muscles:

Your pelvic floor muscles support the bladder and the bowel. They also help to support the pelvis.

Breathe out and imagine you are trying to stop yourself from passing urine or wind. The muscles you are tightening are the pelvic floor muscles.

There are two different kinds of exercise. You should always practice both kinds of exercises. Try to do these exercises 3 - 4 times a day.

Slow pull-ups -

- Lie on your side, or sit in a comfortable position.
- Breathe in gently, with a relaxed tummy and feel the lower chest expand gently
- As you breathe out, gently pull in the pelvic floor muscles as if you were trying to stop passing urine from the front passage or wind from the back passage
- You should feel a gentle tightening inside.
- Hold the muscle for a few seconds and then release the muscle and feel it let go.
- Repeat the tightening 10 times.
- Start gently and rhythmically. You may not feel much happening at first but keep trying.
- The more you practice the longer you will be able to hold your gentle squeeze.
- Try to hold this tightening of the muscles for up to 10 seconds while you breathe gently in and out. Rest for 5 seconds between each squeeze.

Fast pull-ups -

- Pull-up the pelvic floor muscle as quickly and strongly as you can and then let go immediately
- Rest for 2 seconds and then do it again
- Repeat this 10 times

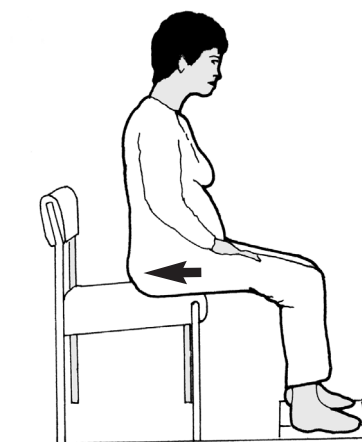
Later on you should be able to practice both these exercises when you are in a standing position. Remember that is important to do pelvic floor exercises for the rest of your life.

2. Strengthen your abdominal muscles (tummy muscles)

Start doing this exercise in your most comfortable position - on your side with your knees bent or sitting with your back well supported.

- Place one hand on the lowest part of your tummy under your baby.
- Let your tummy relax completely as you breathe in through your nose.
- Breathe out and pull the lower tummy in gently. Feel the muscle under your hand tighten or move in towards your back a little.
- Hold this tightening while you breathe normally for 10 seconds. Relax the tummy and feel it let go. Rest for a few seconds.
- Repeat this tightening and holding 10 times.
- Try to exercise the tummy muscles like this 2-3 times a day.

3) Pelvic tilt



Sit comfortably at the front of a chair. Breathe out and rock your pelvis backwards as if you are slumping in the chair.

You should feel the pelvis tilt back and the lower tummy muscle tighten. Hold this position for a few seconds while you breathe normally and then return to the starting position.

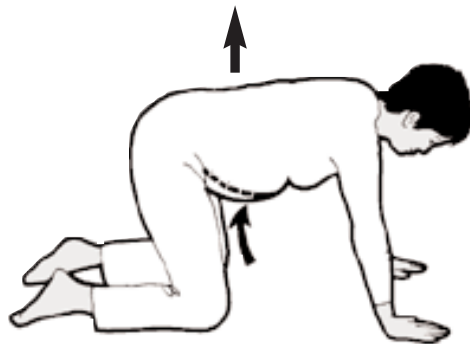
Repeat 10 times

4) Cat stretches

Arch your back up like a cat and hold for 10 seconds. You should feel your lower abdominal muscles gently working and your back muscles stretch.

Then relax back to the starting position.

Repeat 10 times.



5) Back stretches.



Keep your back horizontal to the floor.

Gently rock backwards as far as you feel comfortable and hold for 10seconds. Come back to the start position.

Repeat 10 times.

Are there any side effects from doing these exercises?

No there are no side effects. Following this advice will not harm you or your baby. If you notice your tummy muscles bulging out while you are doing any of these exercises, get advice from the Women's Health Physiotherapist to check you are doing the exercises correctly.

What are the benefits of doing these exercises?

You should have decreased pain and be able to continue with everyday activities.

Are there any other ways to treat my conditions?

Ask your midwife or your GP about pain killers you can take in pregnancy, or ask for a referral to see the women's health physiotherapist

How long will I need treatment?

- If you have a physiotherapy assessment then the physiotherapist will see you during your pregnancy as necessary.
- Back pain usually gets better gradually in the first few weeks after the baby is born
- You will be given a leaflet about your postnatal exercises by your midwife after your baby has been delivered
- The physiotherapist can see you if the pain continues after your delivery

For further advice please contact: 0114 271 3090

More information can be found on following websites:

www.acpwh.org.uk

www.hse.org.uk

www.sohas.co.uk

This information can be made available on request in alternative formats including Braille, large print, audio, electronically and other languages. For further details email: alternativeformats@sth.nhs.uk

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