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LESS PAIN, MORE GAIN: Help available to pregnant women with back pain

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Beach Mirror

In a short time your house will be filled with the joy of having a new addition to the family. But the back pain is making it difficult to enjoy everyday activities. What can you do?

Lower back pain is a common complaint during pregnancy. Lower back pain can range from slight discomfort to severe and debilitating. About 50 to 70 per cent of pregnant women report back pain, usually later in their pregnancy as the weight of baby increases. However, some degree of pain may start early in the pregnancy.

What causes back pain during pregnancy?

In addition to the weight of baby and uterus, most expecting mothers gain some weight. This additional weight should be supported by back muscles and other structures. Due to hormonal changes during pregnancy and in preparation for the birthing process, ligaments in the pelvic area are looser and joints have more flexibility.

This increased flexibility of joints comes at the cost of decreased strength and may affect the support your back structure normally provides for your spine. As the baby grows, the centre of gravity of the body gradually moves forward, which causes even more stress on back muscles and supporting ligaments.

This altered biomechanics of lumbar spine can stress the nervous system and cause pain radiating to legs commonly known as sciatica.

Other factors such as carrying twins, being overweight prior to pregnancy, history of back pain, poor posture and stress can all increase the chances of experiencing lower back pain during pregnancy.

How can you prevent or manage lower back pain during pregnancy?

To effectively prevent or minimize back pain during pregnancy, start an appropriate exercise program to strengthen your core muscles prior to the pregnancy and maintain a safe exercise program during the term.

Your best option is consulting a trained health-care professional, such as a physiotherapist for a safe program including stretching and strengthening exercises as well as core stabilization.

Although keeping strong is important, avoiding activities such as running that imposes increased stress on joints is equally important to prevent back pain. Sports activities can temporarily be replaced by safe and less strenuous physical activities such as swimming and walking.

Furthermore, exercise caution when bending, lifting or otherwise changing position; avoid sitting or standing in one position for long periods of time; pay attention to your posture; and tuck a pillow between your knees when you're sleeping on your side and finally wear comfortable shoes and avoid high heels to minimize the stress on your spine.

How can you treat back pain during pregnancy?

Back pain gradually eases in most women as the due date approaches, but this does not mean you have to tolerate the pain until your baby arrives. A number of methods can ease your pain during pregnancy:

- Use ice or heat packs for 10 to 15 minutes at the time;
- Try to include short periods of rest during your day;
- Wear braces or support devices for prolonged weight-bearing activities such as walking, sitting or driving. Your physiotherapist can fit you with appropriate brace or belt;
- Sleep on your left side and use a support pillow between your knees.
- Consult a trained health-care professional such as a physiotherapist, chiropractor or massage therapist for treatment;
- Consult your physician for medication.

When to contact your physician

In your routine follow-up visits with your physician, ensure you report your back pain and how you're managing it. For the most part, the above pain management methods are sufficient to carry you through your pregnancy; however, in some situations it's necessary to contact your primary health-care provider. Contact your physician or visit ER if you are experiencing any of the following:

- Severe back pain;
- Increasingly severe or abrupt-onset of back pain;
- Rhythmic cramping pains, which could be a sign of pre-term labour.

Note:

This information should not be used as a substitute for necessary consultations with a qualified health-care professional. Always consult a medically trained professional with questions and concerns you have regarding your medical condition.

Gita Mikal is the founder of Pain Management&Fibromyalgia Centre and Physiotherapy at Don Mills. Gita is a practicing physiotherapist with post-graduate training in pain management. She incorporates a variety of therapeutic techniques such as manual therapy, acupuncture and pain education in her treatments. Visit www.physioatdonmills.com, or call 416-444-4800.

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