



PINCHED Sciatica?

Retaining FLUID?

HERE'S WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

By Amelia Iams, M.P.T.

In an article in the June/July issue of *Frederick's Child*, I discussed how prevention can be the best cure for common types of back pain caused by pregnancy. This article will discuss other common physical problems during pregnancy, including sciatica pain, fluid retention, leg cramps, carpal tunnel syndrome and incontinence.

That Darned Sciatica!

Previously, I described how pregnancy causes a woman's center of gravity to shift forward as the baby grows, resulting in an increased lumbar curve. The resulting posture can lead to an imbalance in muscle length and strength and the infamous "waddle walk." Add baby's growing weight and by the fifth and seventh months, back pain often appears.

Back pain with a sharp shooting pain into the buttocks and down the back of the thigh or leg is commonly referred to as "sci-

atica." Sciatica occurs as a result of pinched nerves up in the back or pelvis/buttock area. The "waddle walk" can increase muscle tightness in the buttocks and these muscles can pinch the sciatic nerve.

Two muscles in your pelvic region called piriformis and obturator internus muscles sandwich the sciatic nerve. Stretching these muscles can be useful in alleviating the sciatic pain. However, performing those stretches correctly can be difficult and it is important to speak with a physical therapist specializing in women's health issues to avoid further discomfort or injury. A therapist can assess your muscle flexibility and develop a personalized stretching and strengthening program that incorporates positions that are comfortable and safe for you. A therapist can also aid you in stretching when you are not able to do so yourself. Stretching is critical to help alleviate low back pain during pregnancy. While you

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are pregnant, hormones in your body are working on increasing joint mobility to make room for a growing baby. Yet that same baby is causing your posture and walking style to change, thus producing muscle tightness and pain.

For those for whom stretching, exercise, and physical therapy isn't enough to relieve pain, there are special belts available. Pregnancy belts can help support the weight of the baby and decrease the strain on your lower back and pelvis muscles. Speak with your therapist or physician to see if this is right for you.

The Balloon Effect

Fluid retention and swelling, or edema, is

another common side effect of pregnancy. About 50 percent of pregnant women experience edema at some time during their pregnancy. It tends to become worse during the third trimester and in summer months, but can happen at any point during pregnancy. One's increased blood supply during pregnancy, the positioning and pressure of the uterus on abdominal blood vessels, and diet can all contribute to fluid retention. Although not usually a serious condition for most women, swelling can result in numbness and tingling in the hands or feet, leg cramps, and varicose veins. Taking steps to prevent or alleviate swelling can help to make your pregnancy more enjoyable and comfortable.

Bloat-Reducing Tips

While physical therapy may provide some relief from edema, it is also important to discuss possible diet or medication changes with your doctor.

For temporary relief:

- Lie down or elevate your feet regularly—especially during the last several months.
- Raise your arms over your head for 30 seconds when you feel swelling in your hands or fingers
- Avoid tight-fitting clothes, shoes or stockings.

Pinched Sciatica? Retaining Fluid? continued on page 38



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- Exercise—try ankle pumps or hand squeezes.
- Consider use of positional belts to help alleviate the pressure on veins in your pelvis
- Compression garments for hands and or legs

If swelling persists, ask your doctor or therapist about the benefits of compression stockings. Compression stockings are an effective easy way to decrease fluid in the arms and legs throughout the day. Compression stockings are most needed for those women who have jobs that require prolonged standing or sitting, have had previous problems with

swelling in their ankles or hands, or have family history of varicose veins.

Compression garments are also available for those suffering from Carpel Tunnel Syndrome. Swelling in your hands and wrists can compress the median nerve, causing burning, tingling and numbness and/or pain in the thumb and fingers. The pain often occurs while sleeping, and is aggravated by extreme bending or extending the wrist. Women with computer jobs are more prone to carpal tunnel due to the wrist position while typing. Compression stockings along with a few changes in one's work environment can help decrease your symptoms.

Swelling can also be a signal for medical problems, such as high blood pressure. Let your doctor know if you have a sudden increase in swelling in your face or hands.

Leaky Pipes

Urinary incontinence is perhaps one of the most embarrassing side effects of pregnancy, but it's also one that you can help correct. The added weight and pressures of pregnancy and childbirth can weaken and damage your pelvic floor muscles. Your pelvic floor muscles are a sling that provides support for your uterus, intestines, and bladder. These muscles also act as sphincters to stop or prevent the flow of urine.

Pregnancy, physical exertion, coughing, sneezing or laughing, all increase the pressure placed on your pelvic floor

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and can cause sudden leakage. In order to prevent this from occurring you need to strengthen your pelvic floor muscles.

Kegal exercises are recommended to strengthen the pelvic floor muscles. These are done by tightening the pelvic floor by drawing it in and up, as if you are stopping the flow of urine. It is important for strengthening that you perform several styles of Kegal exercises.

1. The Long Hold

- Draw your pelvic floor up and in
- Hold for 10 seconds
- Relax for 10 seconds
- Work up to performing 30 repetitions a day

2. The Quick Flicks

- Quickly draw your pelvic floor up and in
- Repeat 10 times

3. The Elevator or Steps

- Draw your pelvic floor up and in
- Control the relaxation of your pelvic floor by letting go to only to a halfway point—hold for 1 second
- Then relax all the way
- Repeat 10 times

You'll likely have to work up to the full exercises, but don't give up! Also, do not perform these exercises while going to the bathroom, as drawing the urine back into the bladder could cause an infection.

If you are having difficulty recognizing or obtaining a pelvic floor contraction, talk with your therapist. They can help you gain full strength and avoid urinary leakage. *

Amelia Iams is a specialist in women's issues, including pregnancy, postpartum, incontinence, and pelvic pain at Amber Hill Physical Therapy, which has offices in Frederick, Jefferson and Damascus. Amelia is a member of the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA) and the Orthopedic and Women's Health sections of the APTA.



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