



# With Pregnancy and Back Pain, Prevention is the Best Cure

By Amelia Iams, M.P.T.

It doesn't take an expert to tell you that your pregnancy is causing a kaleidoscope of changes throughout your body! But an expert—such as a physical therapist who specializes in women's health and pregnancy issues—may be able to help you alleviate or even avoid the back pain that occurs in about half of all pregnancies.

In some other countries, women are required to see a physical therapist early in their pregnancy for early intervention and education. Here in the United States, most women do not visit a physical therapist until later in their pregnancy, when they're in a great deal of pain. But every woman could benefit greatly by scheduling several visits with an experienced physical therapist in their first trimester, before problems occur.

Pregnancy signals the body to release a flood of hormones that give a woman's body the elasticity it needs to allow the baby to grow. But those same hormones, along with the front-heavy body mechanics caused by a growing tummy and breasts, can contribute to back pain.

## A Brief Anatomy Lesson

Firm abdominal muscles are important for supporting the back and preventing back pain. However, as surging hormones make muscles and ligaments more elastic, their ability to support the back decreases. In addition, the growing tummy stretches abdominal muscles even more, making them even less able to support the back.

In pregnancy, the whole center of gravity of a woman's body shifts forward due to the growing baby. This causes the back's lumbar curve to increase, which increases pressure on the disks.

Couple that with the increasing weight of the baby, and somewhere between the fifth and seventh months, you've got all of the ingredients for lower back pain.

Upper back and neck pain may also occur: as breasts become larger, the shoulders and upper back may become rounded. To compensate, women develop a forward head posture, which puts undue strain on the neck, causing tightness and pain in the upper back, an aching neck, shoulders and arms, and even numbness or tingling in the arms and hands.

## Exercise Can Help

The fatigue caused by pregnancy sometimes discourages women from exercising or being active. However, exercise is important in strengthening muscles and keeping weight gain within recommended levels. If you were exercising before you became pregnant, there's no need to stop your normal routine. However, you should

avoid high impact sports, gymnastics, and running in your last trimester.

If you hadn't been exercising, it's not too late to start. Try low impact exercises such as walking, a stationary bike, or swimming (but avoid hot tubs). Follow the same common sense rules you would any time you're exercising, such as stopping when you're winded, when you have muscle cramps, or when you have pain.

Your physical therapist can also show you a series of stretches that you can do at home to help avoid problems, such as a hamstring stretch, pelvic tilts on a ball, and stretching the buttock's piriformis muscles. Those stretches are particularly important in preventing problems with the sciatica nerve (more on that in a future article).

### Proper Body Mechanics Are Crucial

We all move in ways that are not good for our backs; during pregnancy, the consequences of those poor body motions are amplified. Here's a guide to changing everyday motions to be kind to your back:

**Washing clothes or dishes:** When you're putting clothes into a washer or dryer or taking them out, either squat or lift one leg straight out behind you to keep the back aligned. The same applies to using a dishwasher.

**Sitting:** Never cross your legs, as it rotates the pelvis and can lead to varicose veins. Instead, keep your feet flat on the floor. If the chair is too high, use a foot stool. Also, choose a firm chair and sit up straight. Sofas or soft chairs encourage slouching.

**At the computer:** Use a chair with armrests for support. Also make a lumbar roll by rolling up a towel and rubber banding it together. This "homemade" roll allows for greater flexibility—if it's too large, use a smaller towel and vice versa. Place the lumbar roll at the base of the chair's back, between your buttocks and the back of the chair. Don't put it in the curve of your back, as that exaggerates the curve.

**Sleeping:** The further along in your pregnancy you are, the more problematic sleeping becomes! Not getting enough sleep can mean you wake up with sore muscles. Finding a comfortable position in bed can be difficult. We recommend finding a position of comfort through the use of

pillows to support your legs and your growing belly. Sleeping on your left side is often advised for maximum comfort for the baby. In that position, use a pillow between your legs to even out the pelvis and a small towel to support your belly. A body pillow works well for this purpose.

**Standing:** If you have a job that requires extensive periods of standing, put one foot on a stool to help keep the spine aligned, and switch feet periodically.

**Shoes:** Whenever possible and as your job allows, wear comfortable athletic shoes that can expand if your feet swell and provide stability and good arch support.

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**Sweeping or vacuuming:** People frequently do a lot of twisting and leaning with these chores, which is tough on the back. Instead, use your legs to move and walk with the vacuum or broom.

Following these rules, along with the personalized advice and exercise program from an experienced physical therapist, can go a long way towards maximizing the joy of pregnancy and reducing pain and stress on your body! ♣

*This article is the first of two articles on preventing physical pain and discomfort during pregnancy. The second article will deal with sciatica pain, incontinence, carpal tunnel syndrome, fluid retention, and leg cramps.*

*Amelia Iams is a specialist in women's issues, including pregnancy, postpartum, and incontinence 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 Orthopaedic and Women's Health sections of the APTA.*



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