

Understanding Back Pain During Pregnancy

Joyce Kight, LPT

Back pain happens to everyone, and for some it is a life-changing occurrence. There are as many causes of back pain as there are tissues that produce back pain. Help from physical therapists is sought when the pain is severe enough to interfere with activities we need or want to do.

Pregnancy is a time when the body experiences a great deal of change. This time can be very challenging, both physically and emotionally. The first and most apparent change is the impact the spine endures due to weight gain. This is especially true during the last trimester, when the baby experiences tremendous growth, placing more stress on the mother's musculoskeletal system. With this weight gain the body's center of gravity changes; this, in turn, affects posture and the biomechanics of the spine.

The average weight gain during pregnancy is 25-35 pounds. During this time the body's center of gravity shifts forward, thus resulting in increased stress on the spine and pelvis. To further complicate matters, the increased stress to the spine comes at a time when it is least able to resist these forces. Why? Something that pregnant women have become very familiar with over the last few months...hormones!

One hormone in particular, relaxin, helps women's bodies to prepare for childbirth by causing the ligaments and tendons that support the spine and pelvis to relax, stretch and soften. Because of the relaxation of the ligaments and tendons, spinal instability occurs, which stresses the joints and muscles of the spine. What's the result? **BACK PAIN!**

Let's take a moment to talk about the system of muscles that support the back and pelvis. It has long been thought that strong abdominals help relieve back pain. While true in part, it is not quite so simple. The key muscles that support the core are the transverses abdominals, multifidi (small spinal muscles), the pelvic floor and diaphragm. While it would take a great deal of time to discuss each muscle and how physical therapists teach these muscles to work together, it is best to understand that all must be functioning as a group to assist in the management of back pain. This is particularly true during pregnancy.

During pregnancy, the transverse abdominals (which act like a corset to the spine and pelvis) become stretched, and their action does not return spontaneously after delivery. Sometimes this muscle is cut during a Caesarian section. The pelvic floor is often torn or cut, and very little attention is paid to rehabilitating these muscles afterward. As a result, the low back muscles and abdominal and pelvic floor muscles no longer work as a team to protect the spine and pelvis. Therefore, back pain becomes more problematic.

It is very important to understand what is happening with your body so you can take appropriate, safe measures to feel better and enjoy your pregnancy. Here are some suggestions that can help you achieve your goal.

Use Proper Body Mechanics:

- Bend from your hips and knees - not your back
- Sit up straight
- Avoid carrying children on one hip; hold them from the middle
- Always carry a load close to your body

How do we treat back pain?

If you have back pain, you can be rest assured that the problem can be treated and most likely eliminated. It is never too late to improve your function; the muscles are just waiting to be found. It won't be easy and it is not a quick fix, especially if you have lived with this pain for a long time, but the journey is well worth taking.

KCP Physical Therapy is owned and operated by two licensed physical therapists, Joyce Kight and Joy Pfuhl. Joyce and Joy specialize in the evaluation and treatment of women's health issues. For additional information or to schedule an appointment, please call (704) 541-1191 or visit our website at www.kcphysicaltherapy.com