

*Ways To Treat Your Lower Back Pain During  
Pregnancy - Naturally*



### **How common is lower back pain during pregnancy?**

Between 50-70% of expectant mom's experience back pain during the course of their pregnancy, and about 33% will suffer from severe pain. For the majority of pregnant women, lower back pain has an impact on their quality of life and for about 10%, it can be so significant that they are unable to work. You may be more likely to suffer from lower back pain during your pregnancy if you have suffered from back pain during menstruation, during a previous pregnancy or before you became pregnant.

### **What causes lower back pain during pregnancy?**

There are several reasons why back pain develops during pregnancy. One explanation is that, as the pregnancy progresses, the increase in abdominal weight shifts the center of gravity to the front, putting more weight on the lower back. This may help to explain why symptoms tend to begin in the second trimester, though sometimes they can last for up to months after delivery. Another reason may be that with the expanding uterus, the abdominal muscles become weaker which can cause a strain on the muscles of the lower back. Back pain that starts in the first trimester may be due to a hormone called relaxin that increases during pregnancy and causes pelvic ligaments to become lax. This can lead to abnormal movements of the pelvic joints and misalignment of the spine, both of which result in pain.

### **Will lower back pain have a negative impact on the outcome of pregnancy?**

While lower back pain that is strictly the result of musculoskeletal strain does not have a negative impact on pregnancy outcome, it is very important to remember that there are other causes of lower back pain during pregnancy that need careful evaluation. The most important of these is the onset of labor or contractions that, in some women, can feel like lower back pain. This has to be taken seriously, especially if the symptoms are occurring long before the due date. So, while 50% of women with lower back pain don't even report their symptoms, don't be one of them. Discuss all symptoms of lower back pain with your healthcare provider so that they can be properly evaluated.

### **Are there differences in types of lower back pain during pregnancy?**

There are two patterns of lower back pain during pregnancy that have different symptoms and may respond to different types of therapy, though some women may have a combination of both. Pelvic Girdle Pain, also called sacroiliac joint pain, is more common. It's described as a deep, stabbing pain, that can come and go, and is located over the back hipbone, sometimes radiating down the thigh as far as the knee or the calf. Lumbar Pain is described as an ache in the lower back along the lumbar spine, right above the tailbone or sacrum and is similar to the type of lower back pain experienced by women who are not pregnant. The muscles around the lumbar spine are usually tender and it's usually made worse by certain activities or postures. Distinguishing between these two types of pain requires a careful history and physical examination, which may involve some simple maneuvers aimed at

more precisely localizing the pain. For example, Thigh Thrust or PPPT (posterior pain provocation test) involves examining a woman while she is lying on her back, hip flexed to 90°, and applying pressure at the knee along the thigh bone – the femur- with one hand, while stabilizing the hip with the other. If pain is elicited, the test is considered positive for Pelvic Girdle Pain. Remember that no single test is completely reliable. Still, you should avoid any kind of invasive diagnostic tool while you are pregnant.

### **What can you safely do during pregnancy to improve symptoms of lower back pain?**

There are some very simple precautions that you can take to manage Lumbar Pain during pregnancy such as:

- Use a back support when sitting.
- Use a footstool to decrease pressure on the lower back.
- Rest at midday if possible.
- Avoid prolonged periods of sitting.

In the case of Pelvic Girdle Pain, there are several precautions that you should take when lying down, getting out of bed, standing up from a sitting position, and even walking, that can help lower the pain.

- Avoid lying on your back for long periods of time. Lie on your side (preferably your left side which tilts the enlarging uterus off of your major vessels thereby improving blood flow). Place a pillow between your knees and another one under your abdomen.
- Use a systematic approach when turning to your side in bed. Gently arch your lower back, bending your knees one at a time while tightening your pelvic and abdominal muscles. Turn your head and reach with your right or left arm towards the side of the bed that you are aiming for.

- Get out of bed by first rolling onto your side with your knees bent; then with your feet over the edge, push yourself up sideways with your arms.
- When getting ready to stand up, move to the edge of the seat (safely), bend your torso so that your head is over your knees then push up with your arms keeping your back straight.
- Get into a car by sitting down first, then swinging your legs in, knees together.
- Take small steps while walking.

In general, you should avoid:

- Stairs.
- Chairs and sofas that too low or soft.
- Twisting, bending or squatting.
- Movements taken with your knees apart.

Source: <http://www.coreconcepts.com.sg>

Exercise has been consistently used to manage Lumbar Pain. During pregnancy, the type of exercise that you do may determine the amount of benefit that you will get. In a small well-designed study, pregnant women who were randomly assigned to an exercise regimen of approximately 20 minutes, 3 times a week for 8 weeks (until the 24<sup>th</sup> week of pregnancy) had far fewer complaints of low back pain compared to women who did not exercise (these women reported an increase in back pain) (Source: Kashanian M, Akbari Z, Alizadeh MH. The effect of exercise on back pain and lordosis in pregnant women. Int J of Gynaecol and Obstet, Vol 107 (2) Nov. 2009 160-161). In this study, the exercises targeted certain muscle groups: hamstring muscles (wall stretch), spine extensors, thigh adductor muscles, lumbar paravertebral muscles (prayer position), thigh extensor muscles (pelvic tilt) and abdominal obliques (side rolling exercises) with brief relaxation periods before and after the routine. So, a well-designed exercise regimen that targets specific muscle

groups and is done consistently may well improve and even prevent the development of lower back pain as your pregnancy advances. It's important to find a qualified coach or therapist to help design a safe and comprehensive routine.

Other forms of exercise, such as yoga, have been shown to have many benefits during pregnancy such as decreasing your chances of delivering a premature baby, a baby that weighs too little or is too small, and even lowering high blood pressure (Source: Narendran S, Nagarathna R, Gunasheela S, Nagendra HR. Efficacy of yoga in pregnant women with abnormal Doppler study of umbilical and uterine arteries. J Indian Med Ass. 2005 Jan; 103(1): 12-4, 16-7). While in this studies, women practiced yoga for 60 minutes a day for 18 to 20 weeks, a less rigorous schedule of gentle poses, practiced consistently may improve or even prevent the development of low back pain during your pregnancy. The following poses are often suggested as they stretch and strengthen specific muscle groups, gently relax the hips and thighs, relieve pressure from the lower spine and release tension throughout the entire back:

**Cat and cow pose:** get on all fours, open your legs a little wider than the distance between your hips. Arch into a cat position with your chin down to your chest, then lift the chin and tail bone up to the ceiling coordinating with your breathing. Repeat for several minutes.

**Child's Pose:** get on all fours, then gently place your buttock on your heels. You can also place a blanket on top of your heels for more comfort. Fold your upper body forward resting your head and arms in front of you on a pillow and opening your knees to accommodate your belly. Breathe deeply then rest for a few minutes. This pose can be maintained for several minutes breathing normally.

**Cobbler's pose:** draw your feet up together. You can place a blanket under your buttock and blocks under each knee for more comfort. If possible, hold onto your ankles then straighten your back. Inhale relaxing your shoulders then exhale deeply. Sit quietly for a few minutes breathing normally.

**Downward facing dog:** with arms at your side and legs together, exhale bending forward at the waist. Walk your hands forward and drop your chest and head between your arms. Lift your tailbone and push your heels close to the floor. Hold this position for 20 or 30 seconds. Gently walk your legs to meet your arms and roll out of the posture slowly returning to the standing position.

(Source: <http://yoga.lovetoknow.com>)

There are some important points to remember when engaging in exercise during pregnancy:

- Drink plenty of water to keep yourself well hydrated. This is particularly important in yoga exercises, which can stimulate mild detoxification.
- Be gentle in your approach. Change positions slowly especially when you are going from a sitting to a standing position. During pregnancy, sudden changes in position can quickly lead to a feeling of dizziness and weakness, because blood has a greater tendency to pool in your legs and can take longer to reach the brain.
- Certain exercises may not be appropriate depending on the type of back pain that you are experiencing: for instance, with Pelvic Girdle or sacroiliac pain that may be due to abnormal movement within the joints, immobilization may be the treatment of choice and engaging in certain exercises may aggravate rather than help the pain.
- Avoid lying flat on your back. Place a small towel under your right flank so that the uterus tilts to the left side in order to improve blood flow to the baby.

During pregnancy, mental relaxation exercises lower anxiety, stress, and even decrease the rate of caesarean sections, forceps deliveries and low birthweight babies (Sources: Bastani F, Hidarnia A, Montgomery KS, Aguilar-Vafaei ME, Kazemnejad A. Does relaxation education in anxious primigravid Iranian women influence adverse pregnancy outcomes? a randomized controlled trial. J Perinat Neonatal Nurs. 2006 April-Jun; 20(2): 138-146) and Teixeira J, Martin D, Prendiville O, Glover V. The effects of acute relaxation on indices of anxiety during pregnancy. J Psychosom Obstet Gynaecol. 2005 Dec; 26(4): 271-6), though there have been no studies looking directly at the effect on lower back pain. Both passive relaxation

(sitting quietly reading a magazine for 45 minute) and active relaxation (being coached by a therapist to use your imagination at certain points during the technique) are beneficial. Similarly there are no studies looking at the effect of breathing techniques in managing lower back pain, though it is hard to imagine that there would not be benefits to taking time out during the day to focus on your breathing and sensitize yourself to its effects on your general sense of physical and mental well being. Some types of breathing can make you anxious and tense, while others can increase relaxation and mental clarity. You can know this for yourself simply by taking the time to pay attention to your breath and adjusting it in a positive way. This simple approach to breathing can be used in all activities. A word of caution: there are many breathing exercises taught in different yoga schools some of which must be practiced with extreme caution and under the expert guidance of a yoga master!

The bottom line: have your symptoms of low back pain properly evaluated and diagnosed by a qualified healthcare professional and consult with him/her before engaging in any form of exercise. Keep in mind that a well-structured, safe routine that you are committed to doing consistently can potentially bring enormous benefits during pregnancy, benefits that go well beyond relieving lower back pain!

### **What other professionals can you consult during your pregnancy?**

Many women will consult a chiropractor to manage lower back pain during pregnancy. Because chiropractors are trained in the treatment of neuromuscular disorders, working with someone who is experienced in women's health and

pregnancy can be extremely beneficial. Studies have shown that women who received chiropractic care during pregnancy experienced a large reduction in lower back pain over the course of treatment, with no adverse effects on the mother or baby (Source: Stuber KJ, Smith DL. Chiropractic treatment of pregnancy-related low back pain: a systematic treatment of the evidence. J Manipulative Physiol Ther. 2008 Jul-Aug; 31(6): 447-54). Chiropractors use different types of manipulations aimed at adjusting and re-aligning muscles and joints. After a thorough evaluation, your provider will choose from among a number of techniques such as soft tissue and trigger point therapy, myofascial release, traction, sacro-occipital techniques and muscle energy techniques (MET) in various combinations. Chiropractors may also use stabilization belts or trochanteric belts to help manage lower back pain caused by conditions such as sacroiliac dysfunction, where the joints need to be stabilized. The belts are about 3 inches wide, are designed to fit snugly around the pelvis and can be discretely worn under your clothes. Studies have shown that the use of stabilization belts reduce back pain by up to 80% (Source: Ostgaard HC, Zetherstrom G, Rood-Hansson E, Svanberg B. Reduction of back and posterior pelvic pain in pregnancy. Spine. 1994 Apr 15; 12(8): 894-900). Chiropractic practitioners often combine several methods in caring for pregnant women with back pain that include manipulation, exercise, nutritional counseling and stabilization belts if needed.

Massage therapists are another group of trained professionals whose skills have been shown to improve symptoms of low back pain during pregnancy. Massage therapy relaxes tense muscles, improves circulation, enhances muscle tone and

increases mental alertness. Many techniques also clear blocked energy channels, an ancient concept that has made its way into western thinking about issues surrounding health over the past half century. Similar to yoga, studies have shown that the benefits of massage during pregnancy go far beyond the proven reduction in back pain. Pregnancy massage reduces prematurity, low birthweight and depression after delivery (Source: Field T, Diego M, Hernandez-Reif M, Deeds O, Figueiredo B. Pregnancy massage reduces prematurity, low birthweight and postpartum depression. *Infant Behav Dev.* 2009 Dec; 32 (4): 454-60). Women who received a 'moderate pressure' massage (of the head and neck, back, arms hands, legs and feet) twice a week for 12 weeks during pregnancy had a reduction in premature deliveries, low birthweight babies and post-partum depression (Source: Field T, Hernandez-Reif M, Schanberg S, Kuhn C. Massage therapy effects on depressed pregnant women. *J Psychosom Obstet Gynecol.* 2004; 25(2): 155-162). Since depression is associated with a worse prognosis for back pain during pregnancy, you are getting a double benefit. Even just a 20 minute massage once a week for five weeks can lessen depression, anxiety and back pain (Source: Field T, Hernandez-Reif M, Hart S, Theakston H, Schanberg S, Kuhn C. Pregnant women benefit from massage therapy. *J Psychosom Obstet Gynecol.* 1999; 20(1): 31-38). Again, it's important to choose a massage therapist with experience in treating pregnant women because there are a huge number of massage techniques that are being marketed. They range from very gentle to extremely vigorous, some of which may not be appropriate for pregnant women. So, after a proper evaluation and diagnosis, work with your healthcare professional to find a qualified massage

therapist. Your partner or a family member can even be trained to give you the massage.

In acupuncture, thin, solid needles are inserted into very specific acupoints on the skin that are linked to a complex pattern of energy channels. Acupuncture effectively lowers back and pelvic pain, and decreases nausea and vomiting during pregnancy. In one study, pain scores decreased at least 50% in almost 80% of women who received acupuncture therapy during pregnancy (Source: Guerreito Da Silva JB, Nakamura MU, Cordeiro JA, Kulay L Jr. Acupuncture for low-back pain during pregnancy. *Acupunct Med.* 2004 Jun; 22(2): 60-7). Because acupuncture requires an extremely high level of skill and years of training in qualified centers, you need to be very careful in choosing a reputable therapist, preferably one with experience working with pregnant women. In the study where pain scores decreased so dramatically after acupuncture treatment, the therapist performing the procedure had completed the minimum of 600 hours of graduate training, and had over 15 years of experience treating more than 50 patients a day!

**Is there anything you can do before you get pregnant to avoid problems with lower back pain?**

If you have the good fortune of being able to plan your pregnancy, one preventive measure that can lower the risk of developing Lumbar Pain is regular exercise before you get pregnant (Source: Ostgaard HC, Zetherstrom G, Rood-Hansson E, Svanberg B. Reduction of back and posterior pelvic pain in pregnancy. *Spine* 1994 Apr 15; 12(8): 894-900). In addition to aerobic exercise, this includes a weight

lifting routine that not only strengthens your muscles, but also teaches you how to lift weights properly without straining or injuring your lower back. Though it isn't as clear that being overweight will increase your risk of developing lower back pain during pregnancy, losing excess weight through good nutrition and exercise, may well improve your chances of sailing through your pregnancy relatively pain free.

### **Should you avoid epidural or spinal anesthesia during labor?**

Having an epidural or spinal anesthesia during labor, will probably not increase your risk of either developing or worsening lower back pain after delivery (Source: Mogren IM. Does caesarean section negatively influence the post-partum prognosis of low back pain and pelvic pain during pregnancy? Eur Spine J. 2007 Jan 16(1): 115-21.).