



Education

Low Back Pain during Pregnancy

What is low back pain?

Low back pain is pain and stiffness in the lower back. It is very common during pregnancy.

How does it occur?

Low back pain is usually caused when the ligaments or muscles supporting the vertebrae (spine) are strained. When these muscles or ligaments become weak, the spine loses its stability and back pain develops.

Low back pain can have many causes. For example, it may occur from lifting and carrying heavy objects, from sitting or standing in one position, or from bending over the wrong way. During pregnancy back pain often occurs because of:

- a change in the body's center of gravity
- poor posture
- a loosening of the muscles and ligaments during pregnancy before you are ready to deliver the baby.

Most back pain during pregnancy is the result of poor posture. When you are pregnant, you may tend to throw your stomach forward, which can cause back muscle aches.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms include:

- pain
- stiffness
- limited motion of the back or legs.

The pain may be continuous or it may occur just in certain positions. You may have it only in one spot or it may spread to other areas, such as down the buttocks and thigh.

How is it diagnosed?

Your health care provider will review your medical history and examine you. He or she may order x-rays. In some cases a CT (computed tomography) scan or MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) may be done to get a better look at your back. Your provider may suggest these or other tests to evaluate your back more completely after you have had your baby.

How is it treated?

These are ways you might treat low back pain:

- Put a heating pad or hot water bottle on your back.
 - Rest in bed on a firm mattress.
-

- Take pain medicines or muscle relaxants that are safe during pregnancy and recommended by your health care provider.
- Have your back massaged by a trained person.
- Have traction, if recommended by your health care provider.
- Wear a belt or corset to support your back.
- Talk to a counselor if your back pain is related to tension caused by emotional problems.
- Follow a program of physical therapy or exercise recommended by your health care provider. Your provider will recommend a program that is safe and easy for you to do while you are pregnant.

Back pain that gets worse despite treatment indicates a more severe problem and should be evaluated.

How can I take care of myself?

In addition to the treatment described above, keep in mind these suggestions:

- Put a pillow under your knees when you are lying down.
- Sleep without a pillow under your head.
- Gain only as much weight during your pregnancy as recommended by your health care provider.
- Wear low-heeled shoes while you are pregnant.
- When you lift something, bend from your knees, not your waist.

How can help prevent low back pain?

You can reduce the strain on your back by doing the following:

- Practice good posture. Stand with your head up, shoulders back and straight, chest forward, pelvis tucked in, and stomach pulled in.
- Don't push with your arms when you move heavy objects. Push backwards so the strain is taken by your legs.
- Whenever you sit, sit in a straight-backed chair and hold your spine against the back of the chair.
- Bend your knees and hips and keep your back straight when you lift a heavy object. Avoid lifting heavy objects higher than your waist.
- Hold packages you carry close to your body, with your arms bent.
- Bend your knees and squat when you bend over.
- Sit close to the pedals when you drive and use your seat belt and a hard backrest or pillow.
- Lie on your side with your knees bent when you sleep or rest.

Women's Health Advisor 2006.4; Copyright © 2006 McKesson Corporation and/or one of its subsidiaries. All Rights Reserved. Written by Tony Angello, MD. This content is reviewed periodically and is subject to change as new health information becomes available. The information is intended to inform and educate and is not a replacement for medical evaluation, advice, diagnosis or treatment by a healthcare professional.

