

Pregnancy-related back and pelvic pain

Patient information

Back and pelvic pain during pregnancy is common and can interfere with daily activities.

The body undergoes many changes during pregnancy that affect all women; however not all women will experience pain.

These changes include:

- Hormonal changes causing ligaments to soften around the pelvis
- Postural changes as your body adapts to carrying your growing baby
- Lengthening of the abdominal muscles as they make room for your growing baby.

While the ligaments around the pelvis soften, this does not cause your pelvis to become "unstable." The pelvic joints are designed to support your weight and are very stable. It is thought that the pelvic structures become more sensitised, resulting in pain. Avoiding movement, increased muscle tension, lack of sleep, stress and worry during pregnancy can contribute to this sensitisation. In addition, your body carries extra weight when you are pregnant, putting more load on structures.

To accommodate your growing baby, it is normal for the top layer of your abdominal muscles to lengthen and move apart to make more room. These muscles consist of two parts that lie next to each other, and they separate as your baby grows. You may notice some abdominal "doming" when you do a sit up as a result.

For most women, the pelvic and back pain they experience during pregnancy settles soon after the delivery of their baby.

If you experience pins and needles or numbness in one or both legs, leg weakness, altered sensation around the anus, genitals, or buttocks, or altered bladder or bowel function, it is important to inform your doctor.

Managing your back and pelvic pain

Muscles can become tight and sore during pregnancy, so movement and stretching are good strategies to help manage this. Often when people experience pain, they avoid movement, when in fact our bodies like to move.

The following are some key exercises that can be performed during pregnancy (and after delivery). Remember to stay within your own comfort levels.

Movement exercises

These can be performed regularly throughout the day.

1. Pelvic tilting

Start by standing with knees slightly bent. Gently flatten the curve of your lower back by tilting your pelvis/hips backwards. Hold for 3-5 seconds and repeat 10 times. Do in a standing position, lying on your side, or sitting on a gym ball.



2. Chin tuck

Draw your chin in as if sliding a drawer closed (or giving yourself a double chin), keeping your eyes level. Stop when you feel a gentle stretch at the back of your neck. Hold for 5 seconds and repeat 5-10 times.



3. Bow and arrow

Stand with arms outstretched in front. Imagine you are setting up to use a "bow and arrow" – bend one elbow and take it behind you, turning your head to follow it, at the same time reach the other arm forwards. Come back to the starting position and repeat on the other side. Hold for 3 seconds and repeat 3-5 times on each side.



4. Shoulder rolls

Roll one shoulder back and then the other. Repeat a few times on each side.

Stretching exercises

These stretches should not cause you pain. Work within your comfort zone and do not bounce. Hold each stretch for up to 30 seconds, breathing normally, and repeat 2-3 times each.

1. Neck stretch (upper trapezius)

Tip your head to side, taking ear towards your shoulder. Keep looking straight ahead. Stop when you feel a stretch along the opposite side of your neck.



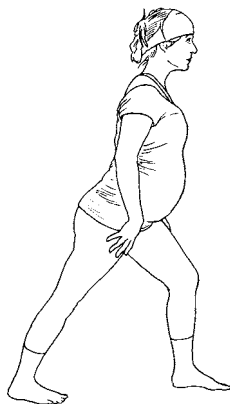
2. Buttock stretch

Rest your foot comfortably on top of the opposite thigh. Keep your back straight and lean forward from your hips. You should feel a stretch in the buttock of the bent leg.



3. Calf stretch

Stand with your feet hip width apart and take a step backwards. Keep your hips pointing straight ahead and press the back heel down until you feel a stretch behind your knee. Alternatively, you can perform this with your back knee bent to stretch your lower calf.



4. Hamstring stretch

Turn your body towards the foot of your straight leg. Keep your body in line with the straight leg. Bend from the hips to lower your chest towards your leg. You should feel a stretch at the back of the thigh.



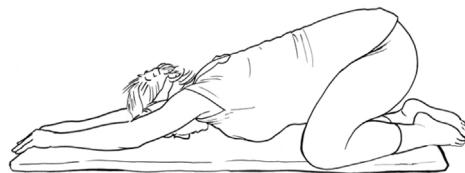
5. Groin stretch

Sit up tall, placing a rolled towel or small cushion under your bottom to assist (if you like). Keeping a straight back, allow your knees to open towards the floor. Lean forward from the hips for more stretch.



6. Child's pose stretch

With knees slightly apart to allow room for your tummy, lower your chest down between your knees with arms outstretched. You should feel a stretch through the length of the spine.



7. Hip flexor stretch

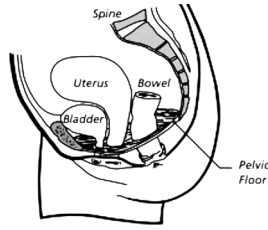
In half kneeling (knight's pose), tilt your pelvis, drawing your lower tummy inwards and tucking your bottom under. You should feel a stretch in the front of your back leg. Gently shift your weight forwards to increase the stretch.



Strengthening exercises

1. Pelvic floor exercises

Your pelvic floor muscles stretch like a trampoline across the base of the pelvis, from the coccyx at the back through to the pubic bone at the front, and sideways to the “sitting bones”.



These muscles play an important role in bladder and bowel control, and sexual function. They provide support and stability around your pelvic joints and organs. Pregnancy and childbirth can weaken these muscles, so it is important to exercise them throughout pregnancy, as well as following the birth of your baby.

Tighten your pelvic floor muscles by:

- Squeezing around the vagina and back passage, lifting up and inwards as if you were trying to hold in wind and a wee at the same time (squeeze and lift). Keep your buttocks, inner thigh muscles and upper tummy muscles relaxed, and keep breathing.
- Initially you may only be able to hold for a few seconds. Work towards holding each contraction for 10 seconds. It will take time and practice to improve. Take time to fully relax the muscles after each contraction for 5-10 seconds.
- Aim for 8-12 repetitions per set, with 3 sets daily.
- Initially you may find it easiest to do your exercises lying down. As you improve, work towards doing them in sitting and standing.
- Tighten your pelvic floor muscles before you cough, sneeze or lift.

2. Abdominal bracing exercise

The abdominal muscles consist of four layers. The deepest layer (transverse abdominus muscle) acts like a corset around your abdomen and lower spine to assist with good posture, maintain abdominal tone and provide support to your back and pelvis. Together with your pelvic floor and lower back muscles, it forms part of your “core.”

- To tighten this muscle, gently pull in your lower abdominal muscles (below the belly button), towards your spine. It can help to imagine wearing a pair of jeans that are a bit too tight and trying to do the zip up. Hold this contraction, breathing normally and keeping your upper abdominal muscles relaxed. Aim to gradually increase this hold to 5 seconds and repeat 10 times. Fully relax between each contraction.
- Engage both your pelvic floor and abdominal muscles before you stand up from a chair, get out of bed or lift something.

General exercise

Exercise, including aerobic and strength conditioning exercise, has many benefits for your physical and mental health in pregnancy. It has benefits in managing pain and may help prevent and manage some medical conditions such as gestational diabetes and pre-eclampsia. The World Health Organisation recommends 150 minutes of moderate intensity activity every week during pregnancy.

Choose exercise that is comfortable. Some women will have a higher level of fitness prior to pregnancy compared to others. If you have not been previously active, start gradually and build up as tolerated. Some physical activity is better than none. Exercises in water can be a good option, particularly as you progress in your pregnancy, as your body is supported in the water. Women with pregnancy complications should seek medical advice regarding exercise. Levels of exercise will need to be adjusted as you progress through your pregnancy. Daily walking can be a good option.

Other strategies

- Sleep with a pillow between your legs and alternate lying on different sides
- Get out of bed through side lying, keeping knees together as you roll over (pictured right)
- Sit to get dressed rather than stand on one leg
- When you stand up or change position (like rolling in bed), gently engage your pelvic floor and abdominal muscles as you move
- Try keeping your legs together as you get into and out of a car. A plastic bag on the car seat may help you to “swivel” on the seat
- Take the lift rather than stairs if you have the option. If you have stairs at home, a little planning can help to minimise how often you need to go up and down
- Break up activities, taking regular rest periods
- Pace yourself and walk for shorter distances if prolonged walking aggravates your pain
- When standing, have even weight on both legs
- Be aware of your posture – stand or sit “tall”
- Avoid sitting or standing for long periods
- Use a stroller rather than carrying your toddler
- A warm pack for tight sore muscles
- Make sure to get adequate sleep
- Abdominal/pelvic support garments may be helpful if activity is limited by pain
- Wear comfortable well supportive footwear



Other useful resources

- **Exercising during pregnancy**
<https://www.pregnancybirthbaby.org.au/exercising-during-pregnancy>
- **Pelvic Floor Health for Expectant and New Mums**
<https://www.continence.org.au/resource/pelvic-floor-health-expectant-and-new-mums?v=13435>
- **Exercise during Pregnancy**
<https://ranzcog.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Exercise-during-pregnancy-pamphlet.pdf>
- **Exercise modifications during pregnancy**
<https://www.pelvicfloorfirst.org.au/pages/exercise-modifications-during-pregnancy.html>

If you find that these strategies are not relieving your back/pelvic pain, ask your doctor or midwife to refer you to Physiotherapy at Flinders Medical Centre or Noarlunga Hospital, or alternatively see a physiotherapist privately who specialises in women's health.

For more information

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