

## Spine & Joint Health

by Paul Cohen, M.D.

**F**or women who are pregnant or parenting or both, back pain is almost a rite of passage. Physical changes, human nature and family forces can combine to create a perfect recipe for back trouble. As such, current and would-be parents should pause and reflect on the importance of their own well-being.



Changes that occur during pregnancy create added stresses on the spine. The center of gravity shifts, the abdomen loses muscle tone, and the ligaments develop laxity. Some pregnancies demand other changes, such as bed rest, which can quickly lead to further loss of muscle tone. And on top of all this, the woman is carrying more weight than ever before.

From 50 to 80 percent of pregnant women will complain of significant back pain during their pregnancy. Of that group, a certain percentage will say that back pain was the reason they chose not to bear additional children.

Unfortunately, we physicians are limited in how we can treat back pain during

pregnancy. Many of the medications normally used for back pain, including most over-the-counter medications, cannot be taken safely during pregnancy. Pregnant women who are suffering from back pain are advised to consult with their primary care physician or obstetrician about what medications they can safely take.

Infrequently, back pain can be a sign of something more serious. Tell your primary care physician about any symptoms that last more than a few days or are associated with persistent leg numbness or weakness. Also, notify your physician of any unusual pain during the pregnancy. Sometimes back pain can be a symptom of labor or a problem with the pregnancy.

What can be done about normal back pain? With appropriate guidance, pregnant women should try as much as possible to maintain their core muscle strength through the back and abdomen. This can be accomplished with guidance from their primary physician and, at times, a physiatrist or physical therapist. Massage therapy and chiropractic care also may be helpful.

As any new parent knows, the end of the pregnancy does not equal the end of the stress on one's back. Even nursing a

baby can present spine issues—my wife calls it “nursing scapula” —a sharp pain behind the shoulder blade. New mothers are often so focused on the baby that they hunch over and lean into the baby while feeding or burping, an awkward position that can lead to significant, high thoracic and scapular back pain. Position yourself comfortably when breast-feeding, with good posture and a pillow between the small of your back and a chair for good lumbar support. Then bring the baby in toward you. If your back aches, adjust your position.

Throughout the day, good posture is a must. Whether you're picking up toys off the floor or lifting the baby out of the crib or high chair, take time to keep your back perpendicular to the floor. Lower the side of the crib and remove the tray of the high chair so that you can move to the baby with your back straight. Bend at the knees and lift with your legs with the baby held close in towards your body, not out in front or off to the side. Try especially to avoid bending, twisting and lifting with the child away from the body.

When carrying babies or older children, it's natural for a busy parent to prop

the child on a raised hip, which frees up a hand. This may feel efficient, but it isn't good for the back. You're better off holding the child in close to body, or using a carrier that allows the child to be held at your midline while freeing up both hands. The one difficult exception involves car seats. I do not know of any easy way to put a child into a car seat without subjecting the back to some stress. But again, the same principles apply: Try to support your back as much as possible, and keep the back perpendicular to the ground while lifting.

In summary, back pain is a significant problem for pregnant women, new parents and child caretakers in general. Most early back pain will subside if the activities that worsen the pain are avoided for a short time. But also take time to follow good back-care guidelines. Remember that when children are little, it's hard to think straight. You're tired, and you're trying to survive a multitude of demands. But part of that survival is making sure to protect a very important person—yourself. ✨

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