

21 pregnancy survival tips
Coping with common ailments
Pregnancy ailments explained
The ultimate

SELL:

Pregnancy can bring with it ailments ranging from the slightly odd to the totally uncomfortable. Here's a comprehensive guide to typical conditions and how they can be remedied

Words Hannah Saunders

My pregnancy was fairly easy going. I had no morning sickness, felt fabulously glowing and sexy, and managed to put on 25kg because of my all-consuming hunger. I loved it! Or at least apart from the overwhelming tiredness and, perhaps more oddly, sore bum!

At five months my coccyx started playing up and sitting on my behind became increasingly painful. Even those embarrassing doughnut-shaped haemorrhoid pillows were of no use. Working at a desk become so excruciating I finally left my job at six months. Then in my third trimester sciatica, carpal tunnel syndrome and heartburn developed.

Every woman's experience of pregnancy is different and, in fact, each consecutive pregnancy can differ markedly. When you don't know what to expect informing yourself about common pregnancy ailments can provide comfort, confidence and power for a woman by allowing her to prepare for possible side effects she may experience.

Dr Gino Pecoraro, a gynaecologist and spokesman for the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Gynaecologists (RANZCOG) agrees. 'It's useful for a mother and her partner to be aware of common symptoms because it helps them realise there is often nothing to worry about,' he says. 'There's a tendency nowadays to fret about the complications so much that women sometimes forget to enjoy pregnancy.'

Following are some of the more typical pregnancy ailments, the explanations behind them and advice on how to relieve the symptoms.

1 Anaemia

Fatigue or shortness of breath can sometimes indicate anaemia, a condition that can arise during pregnancy. There are various forms of anaemia, or low red blood cell count, and the most common cause is an iron deficiency. Low levels of folic acid and vitamin B12 can also contribute to it.

Ten to 15 percent of pregnant women are likely to develop the condition. It is usually picked up in antenatal screening, either in the first trimester, which indicates an anaemic condition prior to pregnancy, or in the last trimester. At this stage it is more likely to occur as your body requires greater red cell and blood production for yourself, your baby and the placenta.

To avoid developing anaemia during pregnancy ensure you have a varied diet, including beef, wholemeal bread, cereals, eggs, spinach and dried fruit. The absorption of iron is increased when vitamin C-rich foods such as citrus fruit and raw vegetables are eaten. You may also want to consider taking a supplement that includes iron, vitamins and folic acid. If you have concerns arrange a consultation with your GP or obstetrician for medical advice.

2 Backache

For the most part, aches and pains during pregnancy such as lower and upper backache and pain under the ribs, near the groin and in the pubic bone result from the presence of a hormone called relaxin.

Relaxin is a protein that is produced primarily to soften and open the cervix in preparation for birth. When it affects these areas it reduces your normal strength there by relaxing the bone structure, the pressure of extra weight adds to these aches. It tends to worsen during the third trimester as your baby gets bigger.

These aches and pains are very common in pregnancy and can be relieved with massage, heat and rest, along with stomach- and back-strengthening exercises. Pilates can be a very good exercise because of its emphasis on core strength and stability. Visit a GP, [osteopath \(I can't advise osteopathy – rather stick](#)

with physios) or physiotherapist for exercise recommendations. It is also important to maintain good posture, avoid wearing high heels and try not to stand for long periods of time. Paracetamol is a suitable painkiller for most pregnant women but you should never take any medication without first consulting a doctor.

3 Breathlessness

In early pregnancy breathlessness occurs as the hormone progesterone causes you to breathe more often and deeper. This increases your lung capacity so you can carry more oxygen to your baby and get rid of waste products such as carbon dioxide that you both produce. In the last trimester breathlessness can be experienced during mild exercise or even while sitting still. If you are carrying more than one baby or are anaemic you will be more likely to experience breathlessness.

Unfortunately there isn't much you can do about it, except to slow down, try to relax and look forward to your baby's birth after which your breathing will return to normal. See your doctor if you experience palpitations, chest pains or faintness as this could indicate a more serious problem.

4 Carpal Tunnel Syndrome

Carpal tunnel syndrome during pregnancy develops when swelling on the wrists and palms causes pressure on the nerves in your thumb and fingers. When fluid accumulates around tendons or ligaments they become enlarged, the narrow tunnel of the wrist cannot accommodate this inflammation so the nerves that reach your fingers and thumb are partially blocked. Symptoms include pain, a burning, tingling numbness in the fingers, difficulty making a fist and even lack of grip. The sensations are usually more prominent in the morning but can happen at night too. Mild carpal tunnel syndrome can be relieved by holding your hand above your head and flexing your fingers, or ask your partner for a hand massage. This syndrome usually disappears a few weeks after birth.

5 Coccyx pain

The tailbone, or coccyx, is the last bone of the vertebra. Coccydynia, or inflammation of this bony area, causes pain and tenderness that is usually more noticeable while sitting or when rising from a seated position. This condition can be caused by an injury or after childbirth but in many cases is not known. There are other conditions that can mimic coccydynia, including sciatica and infection.

There seems to be little information about the causes in pregnancy, with some health professionals suggesting it is more likely to be caused by sciatica and others saying sciatica is actually due to Pelvic Girdle Pain (PGP).

Nevertheless, if you are suffering from pain in the coccyx area it is important to use well-padded seats and avoid sitting for long periods of time. Doughnut-shaped cushions are not useful for this condition but a cushion with a cut-out area where the coccyx is located may help. Massaging the area can ease the pain a little but medical attention may be required if the pain is unrelenting.

6 Constipation

At any time during pregnancy and even afterwards it is quite normal for a woman's bowel movements to change. Constipation is a condition in which bowel evacuations occur infrequently and because the substance to pass is hard and small, it causes difficulty or pain. This can be due to hormonal changes causing the bowel to slow down and resorb more water than it usually does or because the uterus compresses the large intestine.

'Constipation can be really quite disabling for some pregnant women,' explains Dr Pecoraro. 'It is recommended that women drink three litres of water every day so enough water is absorbed into the bowel.' Include plenty of fibre in your diet too. The best sources of mixed fibres are unrefined cereal grains such as oats, brown rice and whole wheat, pulses like peas, beans and squash, and most fruits, particularly apples and berries. Consult your GP, obstetrician or pharmacist before taking a laxative when pregnant.

7 Cramps

Pregnancy can lead to an increased number of cramps in the legs and feet. Cramps are sudden and quite painful spasms that are often followed by a general ache. Almost 50 percent of women experience them, particularly during the night or in the warmer months.

The exact cause of these cramps is not known and to date, all interventions tried including salt, magnesium, calcium and quinine, have not been shown to be beneficial.

Although the cause of this is not known, it is thought low salt, calcium, magnesium and potassium levels may be involved. Increasing salt intake and taking magnesium and calcium supplements may help. Firmly massaging the area can provide relief, as can flexing and pointing your foot. See your GP if cramping becomes a serious problem.

8 Faintness

Caused by a lack of blood supply to the brain and a baby's demands on a pregnant woman's body, faintness or a feeling of lightheadedness can occur if you stand up quickly or have been standing for too long, especially in warmer weather. Faintness is quite normal during pregnancy and the best solution is simply to put your feet up and take it easy. You can also try keeping cool in hot weather, avoiding standing for very long, standing up slowly, drinking enough fluids and eating an adequate amount of food. When faintness occurs sit or lie down(don't advise putting head between knees. down and put your head down between your knees. It may also be worth seeing your GP to have your iron levels checked.

9 Fatigue

Most pregnant women find their normal daily routines are affected by how tired they feel no matter what they do to rest. One of the main reasons for this exhaustion is that your heart, lungs and kidneys work 40-60% harder to take care of you and your baby. Fatigue can affect a woman throughout her pregnancy but tends to be at its worst in the first trimester and then again towards the end of your pregnancy. Make sure you are eating well, take catnaps when you can and have some early nights. It can be frustrating to find yourself looking forward to bedtime when you get home from work at 6pm, but you'll find your exhaustion will ease in your second trimester. Dr Pecoraro believes this is nature's way of preparing the mother to get up at all hours of the night to look after her baby.

10 Haemorrhoids

Also known as piles, haemorrhoids are varicose veins that occur in the rectum or anus. They are often caused by years of chronic constipation. As your baby grows during pregnancy, its increasing weight can place extra pressure on the rectum and the nearby veins causing a blowout or hernia of the vessels resulting in haemorrhoids.

. At the same time progesterone can relax the blood vessels. This causes the veins to distend. Common symptoms include bleeding, discomfort or pain, itchiness around the anus and mucus discharge. Include plenty of high fibre foods such as fruits, vegetables and cereals in your diet and increase your water intake so that you avoid constipation. This will soften your stools, making bowel movements easier. Avoid straining and coughing. Over-the-counter treatments from pharmacies are also available that are suitable for use during pregnancy but consult your health professional before use.

11 Heartburn

Heartburn is a form of indigestion and is common among adults of every age and constitution. When food is chewed and swallowed, muscular waves push it down the oesophagus to the stomach. Sometimes, the muscular valve at the entrance to the stomach may not close properly so food and acid can return to the oesophagus and cause a burning sensation behind the breastbone.

During pregnancy, the hormone progesterone can cause this muscular valve to relax while in late pregnancy, indigestion is highly common because the baby can push into the stomach and force the contents back into the oesophagus.

Simple treatment is usually all that's needed. Food is kept in the stomach by the force of gravity so Dr Pecoraro advises keeping meals small and frequent, and avoiding lying down soon after a big meal. He also recommends raising your head on an extra pillow to avoid reflux when you go to bed. Avoid spicy and fatty foods, and try not to increase pressure by bending, straining, coughing or lifting. Your doctor may recommend antacids if your indigestion is persistent.

12 High blood pressure

Your blood pressure will be tested at each antenatal check-up throughout your pregnancy. This is important as high blood pressure, combined with protein in the urine, can **signal the development of** a condition called pre-eclampsia. One in 14 pregnant women are likely to develop pre-eclampsia and it can even be fatal in rare cases.

High blood pressure can vary from mild with few symptoms to severe, with some women experiencing vomiting, headaches and blurred vision. Water retention can also be a side effect. If you are experiencing the more severe symptoms it is important to discuss this with your obstetrician or GP.

Its cause isn't known but you are more likely to suffer from high blood pressure if this is your first baby, you are having a multiple pregnancy or you are aged over 35. Women who have high blood pressure before falling pregnant may be prescribed medication to help keep it under control during pregnancy. High blood pressure will have a more profound effect in late pregnancy. If it becomes a problem **close observation of both mother and baby** are recommended and in more severe cases you may require hospitalisation so you can be monitored. Your baby may even need to be induced or you may have to have a Caesarean if your baby is affected. Blood pressure due to pregnancy **usually** returns to normal after the birth.

13 Insomnia

It is difficult to qualify insomnia because the amount of sleep required each night depends on the individual. Common characteristics include finding it hard to fall asleep, poor sleep quality or disrupted patterns, and daytime fatigue and irritability.

Insomnia can occur at any time during pregnancy. Your baby cannot differentiate day from night and can therefore be active at odd hours. Add to that your increased need to wee and restful sleep can be hard to get.

Worrying about insomnia in bed will only worsen the situation so, although it's easier said than done, try not to think about not falling asleep. Meditation, a warm bath and a hot milk drink are good home remedies for some. Try not to nap during the day, avoid caffeine and other stimulants and don't exercise late in the evening. Only go to bed if you feel tired and remove activities such as watching TV, reading or ironing from the bedroom. **Your doctor can prescribe sleeping pills xxxxxx [but only up to the end of the second trimester????] can they cross the placenta? Sleeping tablets are NOT generally recommended in pregnancy, so if sleep becomes increasingly difficult see your doctor to exclude any potentially serious underlying conditions.**

14 Itchy skin

Some mothers-to-be develop itchy skin, perhaps due to the stretching the skin needs to do to accommodate the growing breasts and belly. It may also be due to hormonal changes. If your skin tends to be dry and itchy or you are affected by eczema, this may worsen during pregnancy. Unscented moisturisers, calamine lotion and antihistamines can provide relief, and it is best to avoid hot showers and baths, use a milk soap **or soap substitute** and rinse your skin well. If it is concerning you visit your GP or obstetrician to check about taking medication and to make sure it's not due to a more serious cause.

15 Mood swings

It is common for women experience alterations in their mood during pregnancy such as unusual crying or anxiety. Most common at six to 10 weeks and at the end of the third trimester, mood swings can cause a woman to feel almost premenstrual. This can be due to **the rapid** hormonal changes that have a **mood altering effect not unlike PMT**, possible mixed feelings about pregnancy and the physical and psychological changes that are occurring. Comfort and reassurance from your partner can be a big help. It

is very normal to experience mood swings but see your doctor if you are concerned as antenatal depression may be a possibility in more severe cases.

16 Morning sickness

This has to be top of the list for most people when thinking of illness associated with pregnancy. No-one is exactly sure what causes morning sickness but it may be related to low blood sugar levels or the increase in oestrogen and progesterone levels associated with pregnancy.

‘Morning sickness in some form is very common during the early stages of pregnancy and can occur at any time of the day or night,’ says Dr Pecoraro. ‘Its symptoms can range from mild nausea through to continual vomiting. For some unlucky women, *hyperemesis gravidarum*, a severe form of morning sickness, results in the mother having to spend some time in hospital where she can be monitored and rested because she finds it impossible to hold any foods down. But this is in extremely rare cases. For most women, the nausea is relatively mild and disappears after a few weeks.’

Because it commonly occurs when a woman hasn’t eaten, one way to ease the symptoms is to eat little and often. Foods high in carbohydrates such as wholemeal bread, potatoes, rice and cereals are thought to relieve nausea. Avoid strong smells, keep lollies or plain biscuits handy, drink plenty of water and swap caffeine drinks for ginger tea.

17 Rib Pain

After 30 weeks, it is not uncommon to feel pain below the ribs because your baby will be taking up all of the available space. Sitting down can make it worse as can an active, kicking and punching baby. The pain can range from mild to very painful and is most likely to occur in the area below the right breast.

‘The ribs move up and out because you need to breathe faster and deeper in order to do the added work for the baby,’ says Dr Pecoraro. This can strain the muscles between the ribs and cause pain and discomfort but, if you have constant pain in the chest, ribs or upper back, consult your doctor to rule out any heart or lung complications. To relieve discomfort, wear loose clothing, change your posture by sitting more upright, support yourself with cushions, and gently press the baby down with your hand to temporarily reduce the tension. After 36 weeks your baby should start to drop down, helping to ease the pain.

18 Skin discolouration

Irregular skin discolouration, also known as chloasma or the “mask of pregnancy”, can develop on the forehead, cheeks, upper lip and neck during pregnancy. This brown pigmentation occurs because of the **overstimulation** of melanocytes, **by a placental hormone**. **Normally melanin is produced by these cells to protect the skin against ultraviolet light but the role of increased melanin production in pregnancy is as yet unknown**. This condition generally develops from the end of the second trimester and there is no recommended treatment except to stay out of the sun as this can exacerbate it. In most cases the pigmentation disappears spontaneously a few months after birth.

It is important though to see your GP if you notice other skin changes such as inflammation, rash, irritation or if the condition becomes painful or tender.

19 Tender breasts

One of the first things you’ll notice with your pregnancy is that your breasts may become swollen, sore or tender, and sometimes even very painful. This can begin as early as one to two weeks and can last throughout your pregnancy. **In some women, breast tenderness can occur even before a woman is aware she is pregnant**

Caused by an increase in pregnancy hormones such as oestrogen and progesterone, these breast changes are designed to prepare you for breastfeeding later on. One of the best solutions is to wear a good support bra, even when you’re asleep.

Other changes that you will notice include breast enlargement, darkening and enlargement of your nipples and areolas, the small glands on your areolas becoming raised bumps, and darkening of the veins

on your breasts. These changes are caused by the same hormones and every woman will be affected differently.

20 Thrush

Three out of four women will experience thrush at least once in their life. Caused by the yeast *Candida albicans*, and also known as yeast infection or candidiasis, thrush is a common infection that occurs naturally in the bowel and leads to unpleasant symptoms such as a thick, white discharge, intense itching, soreness and a stinging or burning sensation around the vagina.

It is particularly common in pregnancy as hormone levels alter and create high levels of sugars called glycogen in the body fluids along with reduced acidity. This can feed the growth of candida. Because a number of vaginal conditions similar to thrush can occur, you will need to see your doctor so any other conditions can be ruled out. Treatment is via either antifungal pessaries or creams such as Canesten, which can be purchased from your pharmacist. Popular over the counter “once only” oral preparations to treat thrush ,should be avoided in pregnancy as they have been implicated in altering hormone production leading to miscarriage.

21 Water retention

A common problem during pregnancy, water retention, or oedema, causes fluid to accumulate in the hands, feet, ankles and lower legs leading to puffiness. Hot weather, , high blood pressure and standing for long periods of time usually worsen the condition, as can pregnancy hormones that lead to retention of sodium in the kidneys, causing the body to retain fluid.

Alterations in salt consumption have not been found to be useful in decreasing fluid retention, but moderate salt intake is generally advised. Surprisingly, it is very important to maintain adequate water consumption (up to 3 litres a day),as water restriction may well cause the body to believe it needs to conserve water and so worsen fluid retention.

Avoid processed foods which tend to be high in salt, consume three litres of water a day, minimise coffee consumption, do gentle exercise such as swimming, Reflexology and lymphatic drainage massage can also help relieve the discomfort as can putting your feet up as much as possible. If you are concerned about the condition see your doctor as oedema can be a symptom of serious medical conditions like kidney, liver or heart disease.

RESOURCES

Further Reading

The New Pregnancy and Childbirth by Sheila Kitzinger (Dorling Kindersley) Available from www.amazon.com

Useful Contacts

www.ranzcog.edu.au Homepage of The Royal Australia and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists.

www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au A government website offering medical and health information for all walks of life.

www.healthinsite.gov.au A government website providing a wide range of up-to-date and quality assessed information on important health topics.

www.birthing.com.au A website set up by Sydney mums offering comprehensive advice and information for all parents.

Regular checkups and peace of mind

Although mothers and fathers shouldn't stress or worry too much about problems that may not ever eventuate, they need to ensure regular checkups are vigilantly kept. Regular contact with trusted medical professionals allows most unnecessary worry to ease.

'It's important for women to know why doctors take them through many tests,' says Dr Pecoraro. 'If nobody checks your blood pressure or how the baby is growing, no one will detect if anything is wrong.' There are many little things a husband or partner can do to ease some of an expectant mother's aches and pains. Dr Pecoraro says this is helpful for worrying fathers-to-be. 'It can be very difficult for a man to see the woman he loves in pain or uncomfortable. While she may be able to relieve things like back ache herself by enjoying some gentle swimming, asking her husband to give her a massage is so beneficial for both of them,' he says. 'The father wants to be involved. This physical contact can be enormously comforting for a couple because it's about tender loving care. The mother will feel relief from aches and pains and, by rubbing her feet or back, the father feels better because he has the ability to do something to help her.'

As much as it is important to take care of yourself during pregnancy, it is equally as important to enjoy the time you have, creating new life. 'There's no reason why young, fit and healthy women shouldn't enjoy this amazing experience. As long as they make sure to attend regular check-ups it can be a fun time,' says Dr Pecoraro. 'People need to be reassured that, during most pregnancies, everything goes okay. Giving birth to your new baby is just wonderful; it's one of the best parts of life. And your children are some of the greatest people you'll ever get to meet.' Sounds like a dream come true, to me.