

# Common Discomforts and Body Changes During Pregnancy

Growing a baby is hard work! During pregnancy you will be affected both by the physical growth of the baby and changes in your hormone levels. You may notice changes in your body in the early weeks, closer to the end of pregnancy, or the changes may come and go throughout. Even with the discomforts of pregnancy, many women report feeling healthier than they have ever felt before.

## Morning Sickness

Nausea and vomiting are common during the first 3 months of pregnancy. Eating several small meals and bland foods -- such as crackers or dry toast -- may reduce nausea. Women also report being sensitive to some smells, so avoiding any unpleasant smells may help.

## Breast Changes

Your breasts may provide the first signs to you that you are pregnant. Women's breasts often get extremely tender and begin increasing in size very early in pregnancy. These changes are preparing you for breastfeeding. The size may increase throughout the first 3 months of pregnancy. It is important to wear a bra that fits and supports your breasts throughout your pregnancy. Your nipples and areolas (the darker skin around the nipples) will darken early in pregnancy. By weeks 12-14, you may start leaking colostrum from your breasts. Colostrum is a fluid made up of water, proteins, minerals, and antibodies that you will feed your baby for the first few days before your milk flows.

## Fatigue

Being tired is common during pregnancy, especially in the first few months and then towards the end. Exercise, rest, and proper diet all may reduce the degree of tiredness that you feel. It may help to take an hour-long nap daily.

## Frequent Urination

Hormonal changes and increased pressure on your bladder mean frequent trips to the bathroom during pregnancy. As your uterus grows and rises higher in your abdomen, the feeling may go away. As you get closer to delivery and your baby

drops lower into your pelvis, those feelings may come back. If you have pain when you urinate or a change in urine odor or color, be sure to contact your health care provider right away, so you can be tested for a bladder infection. Some pregnant women also leak urine when they cough or sneeze – for the most part, this goes away after your baby is born.

## Vaginal Discharge

It is common for vaginal discharge to increase during pregnancy. This is from the increased blood supply to tissue in the vagina. If you have pain, soreness, greenish color, foul odor, or itching from the discharge, contact your health care provider.

## Constipation

Constipation is very common during pregnancy because of the iron in prenatal vitamins and hormonal changes that slow down the digestion of food. In the later part of your pregnancy, the pressure from your uterus on the rectum may also contribute to the problem. Eating foods high in fiber, such as raw fruits and vegetables, prunes, and whole grain or bran cereals may help. Be sure to drink plenty of water too. Frequently, a stool softener is required.

## Indigestion/Heartburn

Indigestion or heartburn may occur more frequently when you are pregnant due to the slowing of your digestion and the relaxation of the muscle that normally keeps digested food and acids in your stomach. With this relaxation, undigested food containing acid may come back up into your esophagus, giving you a painful burning sensation in your chest (especially under the breastbone). You can help reduce heartburn by eating small meals, avoiding spicy and greasy foods, not drinking large amounts of liquid before bedtime, and not exercising for at least 2 hours after you eat. If you continue to have heartburn, talk to your health care provider about medications that can help.

## Headaches

Headaches are common during pregnancy. It is important to ask your doctor or health care provider if there is a medication appropriate for you. If medication is not recommended, relaxation techniques may help. Headaches can be a sign of pre-eclampsia, so let your health care provider know if you have worsening headaches, especially toward the end of your pregnancy.

## Lower Abdominal or Groin Pain

You may feel a stretching sensation or pain in your lower abdomen during pregnancy. It is usually on one side or the other, and is caused by the stretching of the ligaments and muscles that support the uterus. Usually this occurs between 18 and 24 weeks. It may help if you move slowly and change positions when you feel the discomfort.

## Trouble Sleeping

Many women complain that they have trouble sleeping when they are pregnant. Try not to eat just before bedtime. Consider taking a warm bath at bedtime to help you relax. As your abdomen gets bigger, you may want to lie on your side with a pillow under your abdomen and a pillow between your legs for comfort.

## Skin and Hair Changes

Your changing hormones during pregnancy usually cause skin and hair changes. Some women get brownish or yellowish patches around their eyes and over the cheeks and nose, sometimes called the "mask of pregnancy". The medical term for this is "chloasma." Some women also get a dark line on the midline of the lower abdomen called the "linea nigra."

You may notice changes in the texture and growth your hair and nails during pregnancy. Some women report that both grow faster and are stronger; others report hair falling out and nails splitting. Most women will lose some hair after delivery. In time, your hair and nails will return to the way they were before the pregnancy.

## Numbness and Tingling

As your uterus grows, it may press on the nerves in your legs. This may cause some tingling in your legs and toes. The sensation is normal and will go away after delivery. You may also notice numbness or tingling in your fingers, especially when you wake up in the morning. This goes away after delivery. If it's especially uncomfortable, your health care provider can give you a brace to wear at night.

## Nosebleeds, Bleeding Gums, Increased Secretions

Some women experience nose and gum bleeding during pregnancy. Keeping well hydrated, especially with orange juice or foods high in Vitamin C, may help to strengthen your capillaries (tiny blood vessels) and reduce this bleeding. You may also consider using a humidifier to help reduce nasal congestion. Gently brushing with a soft toothbrush may decrease bleeding gums.

## Swelling, Varicose Veins, Hemorrhoids, and Leg Cramps

Swelling in your legs, especially as you get closer to your due date, is very common. In addition to general swelling, the veins in your legs may swell. These are called "varicose veins." You may also have veins close to your vulva and vagina, and hemorrhoids on your rectum, from the weight of your uterus pressing on the veins. If you experience swelling, elevate your legs. Also try lying in bed on your side, wearing support pantyhose or stockings, and limiting salty foods. Try not to strain during bowel movements, as that can worsen hemorrhoids.

Leg cramps are common in the last months of pregnancy. Sometimes stretching your legs and doing calf stretches before bed will reduce the cramps. Pain and swelling that's in one leg but not the other can be a sign of a blood clot. Let your health care provider know if you have one-sided leg pain.

## Backache

Pregnancy changes your posture and places strain on your back, often causing backaches. Some things that may help reduce backaches include:

- Wearing low-heeled shoes.
- Sleeping on your side with a pillow between your legs.
- Sitting in a chair with good back support.
- Trying not to stand for long periods of time.
- Bending your knees when picking things up, instead of bending at the waist.
- Applying heat or cold on the particular area, or massaging the area.
- Avoiding lifting heavy objects.
- Performing special exercises as recommended by your doctor.
- Wearing soft abdominal support girdles.
- Going for a massage from a licensed massage therapist. Make sure to tell the masseuse that you're pregnant.

## Breathing Problems

Some women feel short of breath at times, usually in the later weeks of pregnancy. This is because the uterus takes up so much room that it presses against the digestive organs and the diaphragm. The lungs do not have as much room to expand as before.

It's also easy to hyperventilate when you're pregnant. If you notice that you're breathing fast and your lips and fingers feel tingly, try to slow down your breathing and relax.

A week or two before delivery, the baby usually drops lower, positioning itself for moving through the birth canal. At that point, shortness of breath may go away. Some things that may help include sitting up straight, sleeping propped up on a pillow, and moving at a slower pace.

## Striations of Sorts

The majority of women that go through a pregnancy will tell you that they got stretch marks on their abdomen. Some women also get stretch marks on their breasts, hips and buttocks. The skin is being stretched by the growth of the baby and enlargement of your breasts in preparation for breastfeeding.

There are many lotions and oils on the market to reduce stretch marks. Many of them smell and feel good, but there is nothing you can do to actually prevent stretch marks from forming. During your pregnancy they may appear red, brown, or even purple but once the you deliver they will fade and turn a more silvery shade and won't be as noticeable.