Pregnancy-related low back pain and pelvic girdle pain (PGP)

Information for patients
MSK Outpatients - Women's Health (Therapy)
We have written this booklet to answer some of the common questions that women ask about Pregnancy-Related Pelvic Girdle Pain (PGP) and back pain in pregnancy. PGP was previously known as Symphysis Pubis Dysfunction (SPD).

**What is PGP?**

PGP is the term used for pain in and around your pelvis. This may be in your lower back, buttocks, hips, groin or pubic bone.

Sometimes you may have pain down one or both legs.

PGP can be mild or severe. The sooner it is treated, the more likely you are to cope and feel better.

**How common is PGP?**

One in five women (20%) are likely to experience PGP at some point in their pregnancy.

The good news is that 94% of women fully recover in the first 6 weeks after their baby is born without needing physiotherapy treatment.

It is more common later in pregnancy.
What causes back and PGP in pregnancy?

- Most PGP is caused by your pelvic joints moving unevenly. As your baby grows in the uterus (womb), the extra weight and the change in the way you sit or stand can put more strain on your joints. The average weight gain during pregnancy is 12-15 kg (1.5 - 2 stone).
- As your baby grows, the centre of gravity of your body moves forward and so you may feel you want to lean backwards. This postural change puts stress and tension on the back muscles and joints, which can be painful.
- Your tummy and pelvic floor muscles become weaker as they stretch and therefore give less support to your back and pelvis.
- Everyday activities at work and home, including looking after any other children will become harder as you get more tired during pregnancy. The joints and muscles have to work harder to keep your body balanced.

Does anything increase the risk of getting PGP or back pain in pregnancy?

- a previous fall or injury to the pelvis
- a history of previous PGP or low back pain
- PGP or low back pain in a previous pregnancy
- more than one pregnancy
- a physical job or workload
- increased body weight and body mass index before or by the end of the pregnancy
- increased mobility of other joints in the body (hypermobile joints)
What are the symptoms of PGP and pregnancy-related back pain?

The pain can increase with everyday activities such as bending down, lifting objects, twisting, prolonged sitting or standing. The pain is commonly experienced on:

- walking
- putting your weight through one leg, for example getting dressed or climbing stairs
- moving your legs apart for example getting in and out of a car or the bed
- turning over in bed; this may lead to disturbed sleep
- sexual intercourse

You may feel clicking or grinding in the pelvic area.

How is PGP/low back pain diagnosed?

The diagnosis of PGP can be based on the symptoms you experience. Tell your midwife or doctor about your pain. A physiotherapy assessment may be needed to look at your posture, the movement of your back, pelvic and hip joints and at the strength of your muscles around your pelvis.
What can I do to help look after my back and pelvis?

A good posture will automatically work your lower tummy, pelvic floor and back muscles. This will support your back while you are sitting, standing and doing every day activities.

The following simple measures may help:

- keeping active helps to keep your muscles strong, improve circulation and prevent stiffness in your joints
- stand tall with your bump and bottom tucked in a little
- change your position frequently - every 30 minutes
- sit to get dressed and undressed
- put equal weight on each leg when you are standing
- try to keep your legs together when you get out of a car
- lie on the less painful side while sleeping
- rest before your pain significantly increases
When standing:

- Imagine a piece of string pulling you up from the top of your head and feel your lower tummy muscles tighten a little bit.
- Relax your shoulders and breathe normally.
- Your weight should be equally balanced on both your feet.
- Try to avoid standing with your weight on one foot, leaning on one side.
- Try to tuck your tail bone under by gently squeezing your bottom muscles.

Practice this correct posture as often as you can.

Incorrect posture  Correct posture

When sitting:

- Sit with your bottom to the back of the chair so that your back is well supported and your weight is on your sitting bones.
- Use a small cushion or rolled up towel to support your back while sitting, but do not make your back arch too much.
- Try to keep your feet flat on the floor or on a small stool.
- Avoid a slumped posture when sitting as this may put more strain on your back.
- Avoid crossing your legs and feet as this reduces blood circulation and puts uneven pressure on your pelvis.
- Avoid leaning to one side of the chair or curling your legs up on a chair.
- Practice the correct sitting posture as often as you can.

Incorrect position

Correct position

Kneeling with pillows

This is a useful position for sitting on the floor.
Lifting

- Even when you are not pregnant, lifting things incorrectly can cause backache.
- To lift something as safely as possible, put one foot in front of the other with your toes facing forward, keep your back straight and bend your knees as you reach down
  - hold the object firmly and keep it close to your body
  - pull up your pelvic floor muscle as you lift.
- Avoid bending forward from the hips to pick something up as in diagram below.
- At the point of picking up a heavy object, avoid both twisting and bending forward at the same time.

Incorrect lift

Correct lift
Sleeping positions

As your size and weight changes during pregnancy you may find it uncomfortable to sleep on your back. You may find it helpful to place extra padding on the mattress to reduce the pressure on your hip joints.

These pictures give you some ideas about different sleeping positions that might make you more comfortable.

On your side
Lie on your side with a pillow between your knees to make your hip and knee at the same height. A pillow behind your back, or under your tummy may also be useful.

In three quarters lying
In this position your top leg is supported by one or two pillows.

On your back
If lying on your side is too uncomfortable, try sleeping with several pillows behind your back and knees.
Getting off and on the bed

- Bend your knees.
- Gently tighten your tummy and pelvic floor muscles and roll over with a straight back onto your side.
- Swing your legs over the side of the bed and use your arms to push yourself into a sitting position.
- Do the reverse to get onto the bed.
- If you struggle to move in bed like this, you may find it easier to turn under onto your hands and knees.
What about the housework?

The advice described here will help you to support your back during and after your pregnancy.

Ironing

Make sure the ironing board is the right height so that you are not bending forward. Stand with your feet comfortably apart.

Avoid standing still for long periods.

Cleaning the bath and making the beds

Kneel on the floor to clean the bath or make the bed. Try to avoid too much bending down.

Vacuuming

Take care not to reach forward too much or twist your body.

Wheel the vacuum cleaner from room to room rather than lifting it. Avoid carrying the vacuum up and down the stairs if possible.

Shopping

Get someone to help you to do the shopping. Avoid pushing the trolley or loading the car if possible. Put your shopping into two small bags, rather than one large bag, and carry one bag in each hand.

Posture is very important. If you do any task that hurts your back you should stop doing that task.

What about my job?

Once you have told your employer that you are pregnant you may need a new risk assessment. Keep your employer informed about any aches and pains you may have during your pregnancy.

Visit www.hse.gov.uk for more information.
Is there anything else that will help support my pelvis and back?

1. **Strengthen your pelvic floor muscles:**

Your pelvic floor muscles support the bladder and the bowel. They also help to support the pelvis.

Breathe out and imagine you are trying to stop yourself from passing urine or wind. You should feel a gentle lift up within your vagina. This is your pelvic floor muscle working.

The muscles you are tightening are the pelvic floor muscles.

There are two different kinds of exercise. You should always practice both kinds of exercises. Try to do these exercises 3 - 4 times a day.
Gentle long holds:

- Lie or sit in a comfortable position.
- Relax and breathe in. As you breathe out, gently pull in the pelvic floor muscles.
- Hold the muscle for a few seconds and then release the muscle fully.
- Repeat this 5 times.
- You may not feel much happening at first but keep trying.
- Build up to a 10 second gentle hold and repeat 10 times. Rest for 5 seconds between each squeeze.

Quick, short squeeze:

- Pull up the pelvic floor muscle as quickly and strongly as you can and then let go immediately.
- Rest for 2 seconds and then do it again.
- Repeat this 10 times.

Later on you should be able to practice both these exercises when you are in a standing position. Remember that it is important to do pelvic floor exercises for the rest of your life.
2. Strengthen your abdominal muscles (tummy muscles)

Start doing this exercise in your most comfortable position - either on your back as shown above, on your side with your knees bent or sitting with your back well supported.

- Place one hand on the lowest part of your tummy under your baby.
- Let your tummy relax completely as you breathe in through your nose.
- Breathe out and pull the lower tummy in gently. Feel the muscle under your hand tighten or move in towards your back a little.
- Hold this tightening while you breathe normally for 10 seconds.
- Relax the tummy and feel it let go. Rest for a few seconds.
- Repeat this tightening and holding 10 times.
- Try to exercise the tummy muscles like this 2 - 3 times a day.
3. Pelvic tilt

Sit comfortably at the front of a chair. Rock your pelvis backwards as if you are slumping in the chair. Then roll your pelvis forwards to gently arch your lower back.

This movement helps to ease stiffness and pain in your lower back.

Pelvic tilting can also be done whilst sitting, standing, lying on your side or on a gym ball.

Repeat as many times as is comfortable.
4. Cat stretches

Arch up Hollow down

Arch your back up like a cat and hold for a few seconds. You should feel your lower abdominal muscles gently working and your back muscles stretch.

Then allow your back to move in the opposite direction and hollow your back down.

Repeat as many times as is comfortable.

5. Back stretches

Keep your back horizontal to the floor.

Gently rock backwards as far as you feel comfortable and hold for 10 seconds. Come back to the start position.

Move your bottom from side to side in the position above.
Repeat as many times as is comfortable.

**Are there any side effects from doing these exercises?**

No there are no side effects. Following this advice will not harm you or your baby. If you notice your tummy muscles bulging out while you are doing any of these exercises, get advice from a women's health physiotherapist to check you are doing the exercises correctly.

**What are the benefits of doing these exercises?**

You should have decreased pain and be able to continue and cope better with your everyday activities. These exercises will keep your muscles strong and your joints moving normally, which is needed for a good recovery.

**Are there any other ways to treat my condition?**

Ask your midwife or your GP about painkillers you can take in pregnancy, or ask for a referral to see the women’s health physiotherapist.

Treatment by a physiotherapist may include:

- Specific advice for the management of your symptoms.
- Exercises to strengthen the muscles in your tummy, pelvic floor, back and hips.
- Manual therapy to make sure your back, pelvic and hip joints are moving properly or help correct their movement.
- Hydrotherapy - gentle exercises in water.
- Provision of equipment (if necessary after an individual assessment) such as support belts and walking aids.
How long will I need treatment?

- If you have a physiotherapy assessment then the physiotherapist will see you during your pregnancy as necessary.
- For some women no further physiotherapy is needed after the birth as the pain will get better, whereas some women will need treatment after their baby is born.
- If the pain continues after your delivery, you can contact the women’s health physiotherapy team in the first 3 months for an appointment.

Will it happen in my next pregnancy?

If you have had pelvic or back pains, you are more likely to have it again in future pregnancies. Making sure that you are as fit and healthy as possible with strong abdominal and pelvic floor muscles before you get pregnant again may help or prevent it recurring.

Where can I find more information?

For further advice please contact:

- **0114 271 3090**

More information can be found on following websites:

- [http://pogp.csp.org.uk](http://pogp.csp.org.uk)
- [www.hse.gov.uk](http://www.hse.gov.uk)
- Squeezy app