



PREGNANCY AND BACK PAIN

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Q&A with Tim Keeley – Principal Physiotherapist >> [View profile](#)



Q: What are the main types and causes of back pain during pregnancy?

A: There can be many causes of back pain during pregnancy. Often the problems depend on previous back pain suffered BEFORE pregnancy. The main type of back pain is muscular pain, which comes from an increase in work rate in the lower back extensors to compensate for the changes in the pelvis and abdomen. Sacro-iliac joint and pelvic stability dysfunctions are common, due to changes in the elasticity of the ligaments as the pelvis slowly expands during pregnancy. The abdominal wall – which you need for your core stability, is expanding during pregnancy. You need good tone and activation with your inner abdominal muscles and pelvic floor to maintain a balance core for lifting, carrying and bending. When the abdominals expand, your core strength can become compromised, so the body tends to compensate with your back muscles. When you become more heavily pregnant your back moves more into a forward tilt position and you simply can't move around as quickly and normally as you used to. Every day activities like bending and lifting even small objects become more difficult.

Q: Should pregnant women who have had previous back problems be concerned?

A: It is very likely that they will suffer either new problems or a recurrence of an old problem. Women who know they have had previous back trouble, or have a family history of disc bulges should definitely see a Physio for specific guidelines and exercises tailor made to their problem. If they have had a disc bulge or prolapse, they will need to do a lot of specific exercises and stretches for their back during and after pregnancy, as well as continual ongoing strengthening and core stability exercises on top of their post-natal pelvic floor work. Using pillows and lumbar supports is very helpful and if they have a pelvic stability problem, the use of a stability belt is very effective.

Q: What exercise should women do and what should they avoid during pregnancy?

A: Women should try to keep exercising as much as

they can during their pregnancy, but avoid doing new or increased levels of exercise. It all depends on the woman and her situation, as sometimes in the first trimester the morning sickness can be so bad she can't manage to exercise much. Low-level pilates and swiss ball classes, light gym work, walking and swimming are all great forms of exercise during pregnancy. There are also specific stretches like McKenzie lumbar extensions for people with disc problems and pain with sitting and bending forward. Maintaining leg and gluteal strength is important, as if she can move more at the hips and buttocks during squatting and lifting, the less strain the back will be under. Exercises such as floor bridges, ball bridges, 4 point gluteal work, free squats, and Physio Lunges are all great toning exercises for the legs and gluteals to help maintain the lifting and carrying strength.

Q: Following childbirth, what are the risks of back pain?

A: It does depend on the type of birth as well as how much lifting and bending-over is done. With a natural birth, the need for pelvic floor exercises is essential to return core stability strength, and as mid-wives say – “for the rest of your life”, to prevent incontinence. With a c-section, the pelvic floor is not stretched, however the surgery to the abdominal wall will mean abdominal strength will take a lot longer to return and needs a lot of specific exercises and there is a higher risk for back trouble in the future.

Q: What can women do to reduce back pain once they have a child?

A: I suggest the partner takes care of the lifting, carrying and jobs around the house so they can reduce the amount of back work the woman does. Once she becomes stronger over time, exercise, strengthening work and all that lifting of the baby, she will be able to do more. Sitting and breastfeeding increases the disc pressure and with reduced core strength the pressures are higher. Simple ideas like having a high change table, high bath in a stand and even breastfeeding side-lying all help reduce the amount of strain on the back. It is essential that all women work on their pelvic floor muscle exercises, increase their inner core strength and slowly attempt to return to general exercise and fitness as soon as they can, aiming to build their core, glute and leg strength back over a few months. ■