

How a Woman's Body Changes During Pregnancy

Every woman expects pregnancy to cause their waistline to expand, but there are many other changes that can occur during those nine months. Virtually every part of a woman's body undergoes some change to accommodate or adapt to the presence of a growing child. Learn more about these changes and the things women can do to minimize the effects of the more troublesome of these transformations.

General Aches and Pains

Feeling aches and pains is a very common experience for pregnant women. As the uterus expands to accommodate the growing fetus, pains in the back, abdomen, groin area and thighs often occur. Many women also have backaches due to pressure from the baby and the increased weight they are carrying.

Pregnant women can try the following suggestions to help ease aches and pains:

- Lay on your side when resting
- Place a pillow between your legs when you sleep
- Wear comfortable shoes, not high heels
- Apply a heating pad to the aching area or take a warm bath
- Avoid standing for long periods of time
- Do not lift heavy objects
- Sit in chairs that provide good back support.

Pregnant women are advised to call their doctor if the pains do not improve.

Cramps

Many women experience uncomfortable cramps during pregnancy. The cramps often affect the legs and feet and commonly occur at night. Doctors believe they are due to a change in the way a pregnant woman's body processes calcium.

Pregnant women can try the following suggestions to help prevent cramps:

- Eat foods that are high in calcium, including dairy products
- Get regular, non-strenuous exercise
- Ask your doctor if you should be taking a calcium supplement or multivitamin containing calcium
- Gently stretch the muscles in your feet and legs before going to bed
- Bend your toes upward toward the sky if you experience a sudden cramp in your feet or legs
- Relax the muscles in your legs and feet with a heating pad or warm footbath.

Skin Changes

Many pregnant women experience a variety of changes to their skin. These changes include itchiness, swelling, stretch marks and varicose veins:

- **Stretch marks:** Stretch marks are pink, red or purple marks that often appear on the stomach, thighs, buttocks and breasts of pregnant women. They are caused by the skin stretching (hence their name) and usually become visible after the fourth month of pregnancy as the baby grows and the woman's breasts enlarge due to increased milk production. Approximately half of all pregnant women get stretch marks. There is nothing women can do to prevent stretch marks from forming, but most of the time they fade or become less noticeable after delivery.
- **Varicose veins:** During pregnancy, there is an increase in the amount of blood in a woman's body, causing veins to enlarge. Also, the pregnancy places pressure on the veins behind the uterus, causing blood to take a longer time to return to the heart. These reasons are often responsible for the formation of varicose veins. Varicose veins look like swollen veins raised above the surface of the skin. They can be twisted or bulging and are dark purple or blue in color. They are found most often on the back of the legs or on the inside of the thighs. Pregnant women should avoid wearing tight-fitting socks or stockings and should sit with their feet and legs elevated to reduce the risk of varicose veins.
- **Itchiness:** About 20 percent of pregnant women report that they feel itchy during pregnancy. The itchiness usually occurs in the abdomen, hands and feet. Doctors believe pregnancy hormones and stretching skin are likely the cause. Many doctors recommend using skin moisturizers and soaps containing aloe or lanolin to help alleviate itchiness. In very rare circumstances, itchiness can be a sign of a serious liver condition called cholestasis of pregnancy. If pregnant women experience nausea, vomiting, fatigue, jaundice or a loss of appetite, in addition to the itchiness, they should call their doctor.
- **Swelling:** Most women develop mild swelling in their hands, feet, ankles or face during pregnancy. The swelling often becomes more noticeable as their due date approaches. Pregnant women should avoid caffeine and salt, keep their feet elevated when resting, and drink 64 ounces of water and other liquids each day to minimize the swelling they experience. Women who experience significant swelling in their hands or feet or rapid weight gain should notify their doctor as soon as possible. This could be a sign of a high blood pressure disorder called preeclampsia or toxemia.

Hemorrhoids

Hemorrhoids (or piles) occur when veins in and near the rectum become swollen and bulging. Up to 50 percent of all pregnant women report getting hemorrhoids. They are common during pregnancy for a number of reasons:

- There is more blood in a pregnant woman's body, which can cause veins to enlarge.
- The expanding uterus puts pressure on the veins in the rectum.
- Pregnant women often experience constipation, which can cause hemorrhoids or make them worse.

Women can try the following things to help prevent and relieve hemorrhoids:

- Drink plenty of water and other fluids.
- Eat foods high in fiber, including whole grains, fruits and leafy green vegetables.
- Avoid straining during bowel movements.

Breast Changes

A woman's breasts increase in size during pregnancy. As the due date approaches, hormone changes will cause the breasts to get even bigger in preparation for breastfeeding. The growth often makes the breasts feel tender, sore or uncomfortable.

Some pregnant women leak colostrum from their breasts, often during the third trimester of the pregnancy. Colostrum is the first milk that the breasts produce for the baby, and it has a thick, yellowish appearance.

Women can try the following methods to stay comfortable:

- Wear a soft, comfortable and supportive maternity or nursing bra.
- Wash the breasts and nipples with water instead of soap (soap can dry and irritate the skin).
- Use a moisturizing cream that contains lanolin.

Nosebleeds

Nosebleeds and nasal stuffiness are common conditions many pregnant women experience. Doctors believe they are caused by the increased amount of blood in a pregnant woman's body and hormones acting on nose tissues.

Pregnant women can avoid nosebleeds by blowing gently when they blow their nose. Squeezing the nose between a thumb and finger for a few minutes is one way to stop nosebleeds. Women should consult their doctor if the nosebleeds happen frequently or do not stop quickly.

Drinking extra water and using a cool-mist humidifier are two ways to help alleviate a stuffy nose. Do not take any over-the-counter medications for the stuffiness without consulting a doctor.

Teeth and Gum Problems

A pregnant woman's teeth and gums require special care and attention. Studies have shown that women with gum disease are much more likely to have premature babies with low birth weight. This may be the result of bacteria from the mother's mouth affecting the baby during pregnancy. Women can ease bleeding gums by using a toothbrush with soft bristles and by flossing at least twice a day.

Every expectant mother should have a complete oral exam prior to or very early in pregnancy, and they should have necessary dental work done early in their pregnancy or wait until after the baby is born if the work is not urgent.

Feeling Tired and Dizzy

Many pregnant women complain of feeling tired, dizzy and lightheaded throughout their pregnancies. There are many reasons for these symptoms. The growth of more blood vessels in early pregnancy, the pressure

of the expanding uterus on blood vessels and the body's increased need for food can make a pregnant woman feel out-of-sorts.

The following tips can help pregnant women avoid feeling lightheaded, dizzy and tired:

- Eat several small meals throughout the day, and keep healthy snacks nearby.
- Avoid sitting or standing in one position for an extended period of time.
- Rise slowly when standing up.
- Lay down and rest if you are feeling tired or lightheaded.
- Have family or friends help with strenuous tasks.
- Try to incorporate an afternoon nap into your daily schedules.

Pregnant women should call their doctors immediately if they faint.

Shortness of Breath

As a pregnancy progresses the expanding uterus puts pressure on all of a woman's internal organs, including her lungs. Pregnant women may notice they are short of breath, or not as quick to catch their breath as they were before the pregnancy. Some breathing problems may lessen or end a few weeks before delivery, after the baby "drops" in preparation for birth.

Tips pregnant women can use to ease their breathing problems include the following:

- Take deep, long breaths.
- Maintain good posture so the lungs can easily expand.
- Sleeping on a side can keep the baby from pressing down on the stomach, diaphragm, chest and lungs.
- Walk and move around at a slower pace.

Heartburn and Indigestion

Almost every pregnant woman experiences indigestion and heartburn. Hormones and the pressure of the growing uterus cause this discomfort. Pregnancy hormones affect the muscles in the stomach and intestine, slowing down digestion and causing many pregnant women to feel bloated.

Hormones also relax the valve separating the esophagus and stomach. This allows some food and acids to come up from the stomach, causing the feeling of heartburn. Later in pregnancy, as the baby gets bigger, the uterus pushes on the stomach, making heartburn even more common.

To help prevent indigestion and heartburn, pregnant women can try the following ideas:

- Eat between five and eight small meals instead of three large meals.
- Consume food slowly.
- Avoid hot and spicy foods.
- Avoid greasy and fried foods.
- Drinking milk and eating ice cream helps some people with heartburn.
- Try slowly sipping ice water.
- Consult with your doctor about taking an antacid.

Constipation

High hormone levels and a growing baby slow digestion. This causes many pregnant women to become constipated or unable to have regular bowel movements.

Following these tips can help pregnant women lessen their chances of experiencing constipation:

- Eat foods high in fiber, including salads, whole-grain cereals and bread, fruits, and vegetables.
- Drink between eight and 10 glasses of water each day.
- Exercise daily by taking a casual walk.
- Avoid taking a laxative unless a doctor says it is OK.

Frequent Urination

The pressure a growing uterus places on the bladder often makes pregnant women feel like they constantly need to urinate. Also, a pregnant woman's bladder is not capable of holding as much urine as before pregnancy.

Pregnant women will need to go to the bathroom more frequently. They should continue to drink eight to 10 glasses of water and other fluids each day because this is important for the health of the baby. If a pregnant woman experiences pain or a burning sensation during urination, they should contact their doctor.

Resources

- WomensHealth.gov: www.womenshealth.gov

Many pregnancy care items and procedures are fully covered under health insurance plans. Visit HealthCare.gov for a comprehensive list: <https://www.healthcare.gov/preventive-care-women/>.

Here when you need us.

Call: 844-207-5465

Online: guidanceresources.com

App: GuidanceNowSM

Web ID: LivingME

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