

INFORMATION FOR PATIENTS ABOUT

Looking After Yourself in Pregnancy

Introduction

During pregnancy and labour your body undergoes change. As your uterus grows, the supporting structures (muscles, ligaments and fascia) stretch to accommodate both the growth and delivery of your baby. The body has increased fluid that can lead to swelling. These changes can be uncomfortable and cause pain.

Your stomach muscles and pelvic floor muscles stretch and strain under the increased load, which can lead to weakening of the pelvic floor, and, in turn, lead to symptoms of incontinence and prolapse (weakening of the vaginal wall which can cause it to drop and feel heavy).

During pregnancy, it is important that you listen to your body. If something is causing you pain or discomfort, then you might need to adapt the way that you are doing that activity. If pain persists then you may need to stop.

This information leaflet contains advice and exercises to help you manage commonly occurring symptoms in pregnancy:

Commonly Occurring Symptoms in Pregnancy

- Pelvic Girdle Pain (PGP), also known as Pubic Symphysis Dysfunction
- Low Back Pain
- Carpal tunnel Syndrome (CTS)
- Diastasis Rectus Abdominus (DRA) – see separate leaflet or on The Harrogate Hub for DRA advice

Pelvic Girdle Pain and Low Back Pain

Pelvic Girdle Pain is the term used to describe pain in the pelvis. It is most commonly associated with pain around the pubic bone at the front of the pelvis, however, it also commonly affects the low back, hips and groin area (see diagram over leaf).

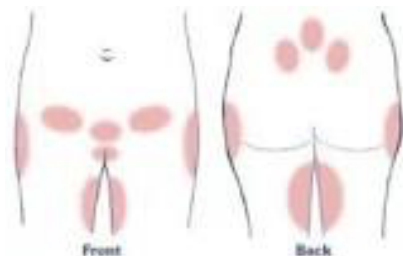


Image from POGP patient booklet
[https://thepogp.co.uk/_userfiles/pages/files/POGP-PGP\(Pat\)\(UL\).pdf](https://thepogp.co.uk/_userfiles/pages/files/POGP-PGP(Pat)(UL).pdf)

What Causes PGP?

Around 1 in 5 pregnant women experience mild pain in their pelvis during pregnancy, for others, the pain can be more severe and start to affect daily functions and mobility.

This can be due to hormonal and postural changes. These changes can be felt early in your pregnancy due to the hormone *Relaxin* being produced in the early stages and continuing until labour, and sometimes longer. As the name suggests, it relaxes and softens the ligaments of the body, thus enabling the pelvis to widen and deepen in preparation for giving birth. Due to this softening, there may be a reduction in stability of the joints. This reduction in stability can cause grinding, clicking, discomfort and pain.

Pain may be felt during normal daily activities such as at work or looking after young children, difficulty getting in and out of a car or climbing stairs, standing on one leg, and difficulty with walking.

Although your body is undergoing change, there are things that you can do to prevent, manage or improve symptoms.

How to Manage Symptoms

Start by looking at what you do and how you do it. It is important to have good posture and to strengthen your muscles to increase stability and prevent worsening of symptoms.

Three helpful rules for the management of PGP and low back pain are:

1/ Good posture

Look at the check-list below and see if there is anything that you can change to help ease your symptoms:

- Stand evenly on both feet. Make sure your bottom is not sticking out, and your shoulders are back.
- Avoid standing for too long.
- If you have young children, try not to carry them on one hip. Instead, hold them in front, so that your hips remain level.
- When sitting, think “hips level”. Ensure that your weight is even through both bottom cheeks.
- Avoid crossing your knees and ankles, or tucking your legs up to one side.
- When sleeping, try placing a pillow between your knees to stabilise the pelvis.
- Avoid twisting.
- Avoid carrying anything heavy in one hand to maintain balance and alignment.
- Wear shoes with a supportive in-step and avoid wearing shoes with a heel.

2/ Avoid separating your legs too far apart

- When walking think about your stride length. Perhaps shorten it a little and walk a little slower.
- When getting into a car back up to the seat, sit down, and using small steps walk your feet around to the front. Engage your tummy muscles and lift your legs into the car, trying to keep your legs together. Reverse this to get out of a car.
- When turning in bed, keep your knees together, activate your pelvic floor and tummy muscles, turn under by going onto your hands and knees and gently lower onto the other side.
- Avoid sitting cross-legged.
- Sit down to get dressed.
- Take the stairs one at a time.
- Try alternative positions for sexual intercourse such as side lying or kneeling on all fours.

3/ Lift with caution

- Avoid lifting heavy loads
- Ensure that the load is close to you
- Bend your knees
- Activate your pelvic floor muscles and the deeper tummy muscles before and during lifting.

Other Aids:

Maternity belts can be worn around the pelvis to provide you with some stability, aiming to reduce excessive movement and pain.

Crutches can be used to help redistribute the load so that not all of your weight is going through the pelvis. They can also help to ensure that you have a good posture when walking, and taking weight equally through both sides, thereby reducing pain and helping to keep you mobile.

Heat can help to relax the muscles if they have become tight and painful or gone into spasm. **Warning:** Never place heat over your bump or directly onto your skin (place over clothing/towel).

Ice can help with inflammatory changes, and, when used throughout the day and before going to bed, may help you get a better night's sleep.

Warning: Never use ice over bump or place directly onto the skin, as this may cause an ice burn. It is recommended that you wrap ice in a wet cloth and apply for 15-20 mins.

Exercise

Exercising during pregnancy is advised. However, it is also said that you should not take up new strenuous exercise such as running or contact sports.

The more active and fit you are during pregnancy, the easier it will be for you to adapt to your changing shape and weight gain. It will also help you to cope with labour and with getting back into shape after the birth.

You may need to slow down as your pregnancy progresses. As a rule, you should be able to hold a conversation as you exercise when pregnant. If you become breathless when talking, then you are probably exercising too strenuously.

The exercises below are safe to do during pregnancy and aim to strengthen your core, increase stability, and thereby manage low back pain and symptoms of pelvic girdle pain.

Engaging Your Core - Lower Abdominals

Transverse Abdominus

This exercise can be done lying down as described below, or sitting on a chair with both feet on the floor.

- Lie down on your back with your knees bent. Use pillows or folded blankets/towels under your head and shoulders to ensure that you are on an incline and not lying flat.
- Take a gentle breath in, and, as you breathe out, gently draw the lower stomach muscles in towards the spine.
- Maintain that position, with the muscles activated for five seconds (keep the breath flowing), and then release.
- Aim to repeat 6-8 times per session.



Pelvic Tilt

- Lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet flat on the bed/floor. Again, use pillows or folded blankets/towels under your head and shoulders to ensure that you are not lying flat.
- Activate your stomach muscles, as in the exercise above, and press the small of your back against the supporting surface and tilt your hips so that your bottom tucks under. Hold this for up to 5 seconds (keep the breath flowing), and then release. Aim to repeat this 6-8 times per session.



Four Point Kneeling

- Starting position is on your hands and knees. Wrists aligned underneath your shoulders and knees underneath your hips.
- As in the exercises above: towards the end of your outward breath, gently draw the stomach muscles in towards your spine. You should feel a gentle lift of your stomach muscles.
- Hold this position for 3-5 flowing breaths. Release and repeat up to 10 times.



Mini Squat

- Standing tall with good posture. Step your feet a little wider than hip width and toes pointing forwards.
- Bend your knees whilst squatting (sticking your bottom out as though to sit in a chair). At the same time extend your arms in front of you. Take care that the knees are in-line with the second toe, but do not go forward of the toes.
- Activate your glutes (squeeze your bottom cheeks) and return to standing position. Repeat this 5-10 times and aim to do 3 sets of 10, as able. You can do this holding onto a chair if needed.



Pelvic Floor Exercises

What and where are the Pelvic Floor Muscles?

The pelvic floor muscles form the floor of your pelvis. They attach to the pubic bone at the front of your pelvis and attach to the coccyx at the back. They support your pelvic organs and control the front and back passages, giving you control as to when you pass urine and open your bowels.

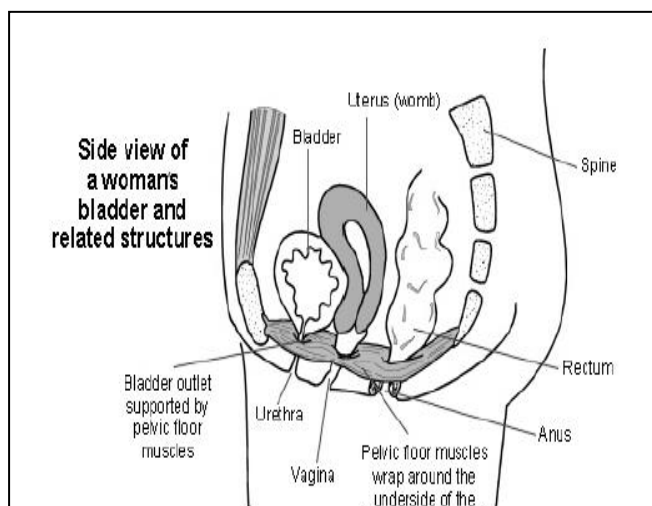


Diagram copy EMIS and PiP 2006, as distributed on www.patient.co.uk

The muscles stretch during pregnancy and can be stretched further during delivery. If the muscles are allowed to remain weak, there is an increased risk of incontinence and vaginal or uterine prolapse. It is important that you exercise the pelvic floor and avoid straining when opening your bowels to prevent weakening of the muscles. It is said that having a strong pelvic floor can facilitate labour!

There are two muscle fibre types in the pelvic floor: fast twitch and slow twitch. They each have a different function. The fast twitch fibres activate quickly to prevent the leakage of urine when you laugh, cough or sneeze. The slow twitch fibres help you to “hold on” when you get the urge to empty your bladder. Because of this, the pelvic floor has two exercises – short (squeeze and release) and long (squeeze and hold). By exercising the pelvic floor regularly, you will increase its strength.

How to Exercise Your Pelvic Floor:

Exercise 1 – Squeeze and Hold

Step 1

Sit, stand or lie comfortably with your knees slightly apart.

Step 2

Gently breathe in to prepare. As you breathe out, tighten the muscle around your back passage as if you are trying to stop yourself from passing wind. Now tighten the muscles around your front passage as if you are trying to stop yourself passing urine. Aim to hold both back and front pelvic floor muscles tight for 5-10 seconds (without holding your breath). The feeling is one of “squeeze and lift”, and you should feel your lower abdomen draw in slightly.

Fully relax for 4 seconds and aim to repeat up to 10 times.

When doing the exercises, avoid tightening your buttocks and squeezing your legs together.

Exercise 2 – Squeeze and Release

In the same position as Exercise 1, gently breathe in to prepare. As you breathe out, tighten the back and front pelvic floor muscles for a short, strong squeeze and, as you breathe in, relax the muscles fully.

Aim to build up to doing 10 short squeezes up to 10 times without holding your breath.

Aim to repeat both long and short squeezes 3-6 times a day.

Your starting point - this is the maximum number of seconds you can hold your contraction for (up to 10 seconds), and the maximum times you can repeat this (up to 10 repetitions).

Build up your exercise routine gradually. You should notice an improvement in the first three months (this can sometimes take longer).

Aim to progress the position you do your exercises in from side lying to sitting to standing and, over time, practise them whilst doing activities such as walking and bending.

Keep practising your pelvic floor muscle exercises twice a day to maintain the improvement.

Tips to Help You Remember to do The Exercise:

- Try to make the exercises part of your daily routine. Perhaps do them at the same time as another activity, such as brushing your teeth / when washing your hands/when sitting on the toilet after emptying your bladder.
- Try downloading an app on your phone such as the NHS squeeze app.
- Put a reminder on your phone or set an alarm.

Please do not practise these exercises by stopping the flow of your urine as this may lead to bladder problems.

Carpal Tunnel Syndrome

The carpal tunnel is located at the wrist. Several structures pass through the tunnel including tendons, blood vessels and the median nerve. The median nerve is responsible for the feeling that you get in the thumb and first two fingers of each hand.

During pregnancy you can experience swelling throughout the body which can accumulate in the legs and hands. This swelling may reduce the space in the carpal tunnel and can cause compression of the median nerve which leads to the symptoms listed below, and is known as carpal tunnel syndrome (CTS)

Symptoms include:

- Pain
- Swelling
- Pins and needles and numbness, mainly in the thumb and first two fingers
- Pain that shoots up the arm and into the shoulder
- Symptoms are often worse at night, first thing in the morning, or following a repetitive task.
- Weaker grip

Management Advice for CTS

- Elevate your arms with fingertips pointing to the ceiling.

- Self-massage the hand starting at the fingertips and moving along the hand and arm towards your body.
- Apply ice wrapped in a wet cloth to the front of your wrist for 10-15 minutes, 3-4 times each day. **Warning:** do not use ice if you cannot feel the difference between hot and cold as this could lead to an ice burn.
- Contrast bathing for 1 min: alternately immersing the hand in a bowl of cool icy water and then in a bowl of warm water (for 1 minute up to 10 minutes).
- Try to keep the wrist in a neutral position when undertaking daily tasks (avoid bending the wrist).
- Avoid repetitive activities such as typing, mixing, ironing.
- Avoid any heavy lifting as this can cause tendons in the tunnel to swell, thereby further reducing the space.
- Wear a wrist splint to help keep the wrist in a neutral position. Ideally the splint will have a metal support in to prevent you from bending the wrist (seek guidance from a Physiotherapist as to how and when to use a splint).

If after trying the advice and exercises in this leaflet over a two-week period symptoms do not improve, or worsen, then it is advised that you seek help from a Health professional and or referral to Women's Health Physiotherapy.

If you have any queries, the obstetric physiotherapists will be pleased to give you advice and can be contacted on 01423 553089.

[Women's and Men's Health Physiotherapy]
Harrogate District Hospital
Lancaster Park Road
Harrogate HG2 7SX
01423 885959
Direct line: 01423 553089
www.hdft.nhs.uk

Version: 1

HDFT approval date: March 2021