

Common
concerns in
pregnancy

All the changes that occur in your body to support your baby's development can cause you some physical discomfort. This section deals with some of the more common symptoms and concerns that women might experience in pregnancy. If you are worried at any time about how you are feeling, speak with your midwife or doctor.

Abdominal ache

Abdominal ache is common in the second and third trimesters. It's called round ligament pain. Round ligaments are supports on each side of the uterus. The growing uterus tugs on these ligaments, causing pain. It's harmless but it can hurt. Changing position can help ease the strain on the ligaments. Tell your midwife or doctor if pain becomes severe or persistent.

Backache

Backache is common in later pregnancy. It's probably caused by the softening of ligaments in your lower back and pelvis, as well as by the extra weight of the growing uterus. Sometimes the pain can be enough to interfere with normal activities including work and sleep.

Some things that may help include:

- aquarobics (gentle exercise in water)
- hot packs
- regular exercise, including walking
- alternate standing and sitting activities, but don't stand when you can sit
- resting each day (lie down if you can or try resting, tummy first, on a beanbag)
- wearing flat shoes instead of high heels
- circling your elbows, which helps to relieve pain in the upper back. Put your fingers on your shoulders and make circles backwards with your elbows
- acupuncture.

Tell your midwife or doctor if backache is severe or persistent.

For more information, see *Give me strength: pre- and post-natal exercises* on page 37.

Bleeding gums and tooth problems

During pregnancy, hormonal changes can make your gums more easily irritated and inflamed. If you develop red, puffy or tender gums that bleed when you brush, you're experiencing an exaggerated response to plaque that builds up on your teeth. Careful and gentle brushing and flossing will help prevent this. Have a dental check-up before you get pregnant or early in pregnancy to make sure your teeth and gums are in good shape. See your dentist if bleeding gums persist. It's safe to have dental treatment when you are pregnant.

If gum disease is not treated, it can cause problems for both you and your baby. Poor maternal oral health after birth increases the risk of infants developing tooth problems early through the direct transmission of bacteria from mothers to their children. It can also make it harder for you to eat the good diet you need to eat during pregnancy and breastfeeding.

If you crave sugary foods while you're pregnant, or are eating small amounts of food frequently due to morning sickness, good dental care is even more important. Keep your teeth and gums healthy by:

- brushing your teeth with fluoride toothpaste, before breakfast and last thing at night before bed
- using a toothbrush with soft bristles and a small head
- cleaning between teeth daily with dental floss
- don't smoke – it increases the risk of gum disease and tooth loss
- seeing your dentist, if you haven't had your teeth checked in the previous 12 months
- visiting your dentist if you have any signs of tooth decay and/or gum disease.

Breathlessness

Most pregnant women feel short of breath in early and late pregnancy. It's generally harmless and doesn't affect the baby. Talk to your midwife or doctor if your breathlessness becomes severe or comes on suddenly or if it occurs when you lie down.

If you have a bad cough or cold with sudden attacks of breathlessness or breathing problems, tell your midwife or doctor.

Burning or stinging when urinating

Burning or stinging when you're urinating can be a sign of a urinary tract infection (cystitis). These infections are more common in pregnancy. Tell your midwife or doctor if you have these symptoms: early treatment is important.

Constipation

Hormonal changes can slow your bowels down. Move them along with regular exercise, plenty of fluids and fibre-rich foods (wholegrain bread and cereals, unprocessed bran, vegetables, fresh and dried fruit, nuts, dried beans and dried peas). It's safe to use a mild laxative or a fibre supplement until diet and exercise take effect, but avoid harsh laxatives. Iron tablets can sometimes cause constipation – if you take them, ask your midwife or doctor about changing to a different type.

Cramps

Muscle cramps in the foot, leg or thigh are common, especially in late pregnancy and at night. Some tips:

- try rubbing the muscle firmly, or stretching it by walking around for a while
- relieve a foot cramp by bending your foot upwards with your hand
- try not to stretch with your toes pointed.

A magnesium supplement might help – talk to your doctor. Calcium is often suggested as a remedy, but there's no evidence that it really works.

Feeling faint

Pregnancy affects the circulation system. Standing for too long, especially when it's hot, can make you feel faint or you may feel dizzy if you get up quickly after lying down. Lie or sit down at the first sign of faintness and put your head between your legs until you feel better. Drinking plenty of fluids also helps. In pregnancy, your blood sugar levels can go up and down more significantly and low blood sugar may make you feel faint, so eat regularly to keep your blood sugar levels even.

Frequent dizziness or fainting early in pregnancy (especially if there is vaginal bleeding or abdominal pain) could mean an ectopic pregnancy. See your doctor straight away if you experience these symptoms.

Food cravings

Sudden urges for sweet foods, fruit or cereals, and cravings for unusual foods or foods you don't usually eat are probably caused by hormonal changes. It's okay to indulge these cravings occasionally, as long as your diet is healthy and balanced.

Frequently passing urine

In early pregnancy, needing to pass urine frequently is possibly caused by hormonal changes. In later pregnancy, it's more likely to be caused by the weight of the uterus pressing on the bladder. If you're having twins, this may be even more of a problem. In the later stages of pregnancy, you may find it harder to empty your bladder, and may also 'leak' a little urine when you sneeze, cough or lift something. Doing your pelvic floor exercise each day will help prevent this. For more information, see *Give me strength: pre- and post-natal exercises* on page 37. If passing urine causes stinging or burning, let your midwife or doctor know, as it may be a sign of an infection.

Headaches

Headaches are more likely in the early months. Rest and relaxation are the best treatments. Make sure you're drinking enough water as headaches can be caused by dehydration, especially in warm weather. Headaches can also be a sign of eye strain which can happen due to relaxation of your eye muscles (remember, all your ligaments and muscles go through changes in pregnancy) so it can be useful to get your eyes checked. If headaches are frequent and severe, tell your doctor or midwife. In later pregnancy, headaches could be a sign of high blood pressure.

Heartburn

Heartburn causes a burning feeling in your chest, sometimes with a taste of bitter fluid in your mouth. It is possibly caused by hormonal changes and the growing uterus pressing the stomach. It's common in the second half of pregnancy and the best remedy is to sit up for a while and drink some milk – this neutralises the stomach acid, which spills into the oesophagus (food passage), causing heartburn.

Ways to prevent heartburn include:

- eating slowly, and eating frequent, small meals instead of one large one
- avoiding large amounts of food close to bedtime
- eating and drinking at separate times
- sleeping in a semi-upright position, supported by pillows.

If these things don't help, your midwife or doctor may suggest an antacid.

Itching

As your baby grows, the skin of your abdomen gets tighter and may feel itchy. A moisturising cream may help. The itching may also be a sign of an uncommon condition called cholestasis, which is a liver disorder. Cholestasis can cause complications and is associated with premature birth, so it is important to mention the itchiness to your midwife or doctor. Itchy genitals may mean a thrush infection. Check with your midwife or doctor.

Morning sickness

There are lots of things that may help you to feel better during the early months. Here are a few ideas some women have found helpful. Not all things work for everyone, so keep experimenting to find something that helps you.

- Try to avoid triggers (like certain smells or even looking at certain things) that make you feel sick.
- Drink plenty of fluids. It's best to drink small amounts often instead of a lot at once. You may find it's best to drink between meals rather than with them, but avoid caffeinated drinks e.g. coffee, cola etc.
- Avoid an empty stomach. Have frequent small, dry snacks like unbuttered toast, crackers or fruit.
- Avoid fatty food.
- Eat small meals often rather than eating a lot of food at once.
- Try to eat when you feel least nauseous. Try eating fresh cold foods like salads if the smell of cooking makes you feel sick.
- Eat something before you get out of bed in the morning (keep some water and crackers beside the bed). Get out of bed slowly and take your time in the morning rather than rushing.
- Rest when you can – fatigue can make nausea worse.
- Try taking vitamin B6.
- Acupressure wristbands for travel sickness (available from pharmacies) can help.

- Try ginger tablets, dry ginger ale, peppermint tea or ginger tea (put three or four slices of fresh ginger in hot water for five minutes).
- Don't brush teeth straight after vomiting – rinse your mouth with water and wipe a smear of fluoride toothpaste over your teeth.

These are just a few ideas. Other cultures have other remedies that are popular. If nothing helps, talk to your midwife or doctor. Prescription medications are available if symptoms are severe. If your morning sickness is particularly severe, you may need to be hospitalised.

MotherSafe has a factsheet on nausea and vomiting in pregnancy and remedies that are safe for you and your baby. Visit www.mothersafe.org.au and click on 'Factsheets'.

Nose bleeds

Nose bleeds can happen because of the extra supply of blood to the lining of your nose in pregnancy. Blowing your nose gently helps prevent them. If you get a nosebleed, try applying pressure to the bridge of the nose. If this doesn't stop the bleeding, see a doctor as soon as possible.

Piles (haemorrhoids)

Piles are varicose veins in the anus that cause soreness, itching and slight bleeding. The cause can be constipation and/or pressure from the baby's head. The best remedy is to avoid straining (squatting rather than sitting on the toilet may help). Look at the section on constipation for helpful hints. Ask your doctor or midwife to suggest a soothing ointment.

Saliva

You may produce extra saliva (and even dribble in your sleep!). It's normal during pregnancy.

Skin

Some women develop acne for the first time during pregnancy. Or, if you already have acne, you might find it's worse than usual. You might also get patches of darker skin on your face. These are called chloasma and will fade after the baby is born.

Sleeping problems

Insomnia can become a problem in late pregnancy. Your sleep is easily disturbed by visits to the toilet, heartburn, a busy baby or difficulty getting comfortable. Perhaps you're feeling anxious about the birth or parenthood – that's normal too. Some women also have vivid, disturbing dreams at this time – again, possibly a result of anxiety.

Things that may help include:

- avoiding caffeine (particularly in the later part of the day)
- a warm shower or bath before bed
- relaxing music or relaxation techniques (see *Getting ready for labour and birth* on page 67) to help you go to sleep
- sleeping with one pillow under your tummy and another under your legs
- reading for a while with a drink of warm milk.

If nothing works and you feel exhausted, see your doctor or midwife.

Stretch marks

Not everyone gets stretch marks – fine, red lines that usually appear on the abdomen, breasts and thighs – but they're more likely if you put on weight rapidly. They don't disappear completely after pregnancy, but they do fade to a faint, silvery-white. Although studies show that massaging the skin with oils or creams won't prevent stretch marks, it may help to keep your skin soft.

Swollen ankles

Swelling in your ankles and feet in pregnancy can be normal. It's caused by extra fluid in your body, some of which collects in your legs. If you stand for long periods, especially in hot weather, this fluid can make your ankles and feet swell. The swelling tends to get worse towards the end of the day and usually goes down at night while you sleep. It's more common towards the end of pregnancy.

Things that may help include:

- wearing comfortable shoes
- gentle leg and ankle exercise
- putting your feet up as often as possible
- using less salt and eating fewer salty foods.

You should also tell your midwife or doctor as soon as possible if the swelling is there early in the day and doesn't go down at night, or if you notice swelling in other parts of your body (like your hands, fingers and face).

Vaginal discharge

During pregnancy, there's usually an increase in normal white vaginal discharge. Tell your midwife or doctor about any discharge that smells unpleasant, causes soreness, itching or irritation, or is greenish or brownish in colour.

Varicose veins

When the uterus grows in pregnancy it presses on the veins of the pelvis. This can slow down the return of blood flowing back from the legs to the upper body. Hormonal changes can also affect the valves in your veins, which help the blood flow back up the legs, also contributing to the development of varicose veins. A family history of varicose veins makes you more likely to get them in pregnancy. Help prevent them by:

- avoiding tight underpants or anything that fits tightly around the top of the leg – these can restrict circulation
- changing weight frequently from foot to foot when you stand for long periods
- putting your feet up whenever you can, with your legs supported
- speeding up circulation with foot exercises – move feet up and down at the ankles and around in circles a few times
- putting on support pantyhose before you get up in the morning and wearing them throughout the day
- ice or cool packs against sore swollen veins can provide relief.

Varicose veins can also appear in the vulva (external genitals), making it sore and swollen. Tell your doctor or midwife – they may suggest wearing a sanitary pad firmly against the swollen part as a support. You can also try the suggestions above to get some relief.