

# PATIENT EDUCATION



The American College of  
Obstetricians and Gynecologists  
WOMEN'S HEALTH CARE PHYSICIANS

## Back Pain During Pregnancy

Backache is one of the most common pregnancy problems, especially in the later months. The pain usually goes away after the baby is born. But for many women, back pain lingers for months after giving birth.

### You Need to Know

- what causes back pain during pregnancy
- everyday tips for easing pain
- exercises to support a healthy back
- signs that you should call your health care professional

### What to Know About Back Pain During Pregnancy

You can blame your growing **uterus** for your aching back. Your expanding uterus shifts your center of gravity and stretches out and weakens your abdominal muscles. This changes your posture and puts a strain on your back. Plus, the extra weight you're carrying means more work for your muscles and increased stress on your joints. This is why your back may feel worse at the end of the day.

#### *What role do the abdominal muscles play in back pain?*

The abdominal muscles support the spine and play an important role in the health of the back. During pregnancy, these muscles stretch and weaken. These changes also can increase your risk of hurting your back during exercise.

#### *Do hormones contribute to back pain?*

Yes, pregnancy **hormones** can contribute to back pain. To prepare for the passage of the baby through the

birth canal, a hormone relaxes the **ligaments** in the joints of your pelvis to make them more flexible. Back pain can occur if the joints become too flexible.

### Self-Care for Back Pain

There are several things you can do to prevent or ease back pain. For example, wear supportive clothing and shoes. Pay attention to your position when sitting, sleeping, and lifting things. If you need to stand for a long time, rest one foot on a stool or a box to take the strain off your back. You also can use heat or cold to soothe sore muscles.

#### *What can I wear to support my back?*

Look for an abdominal support garment (for sale in maternity stores and catalogs). It looks like a girdle and helps take the weight of your belly off your back muscles. Also, some maternity pants come with a wide elastic band that fits under the curve of your belly to help support its weight.

### **What shoes should I wear during pregnancy?**

Wear low-heeled (but not flat) shoes with good arch support, such as walking shoes or athletic shoes. Avoid high heels—they tilt your body forward and strain your lower back muscles.

### **What can I do for support when sitting?**

Sit in chairs with good back support or tuck a small pillow behind your lower back. Lumbar supports, special devices that support the lower back, are sold at office-supply and medical supply stores.

### **How can I lift things safely?**

If you must lift something, squat down, bend your knees, and keep your back straight. Do not bend at the waist to pick up things.

### **What can I do during sleep to better support my back?**

Sleeping on your side is best later in pregnancy. Keep one or both knees bent. It also may help to place a pillow between your knees and another under your belly. You also can try a full-length body pillow.

### **How can I use heat or cold safely?**

You can use a heating pad or warm water bottle for painful back muscles. Heating pads should be set at the lowest possible temperature setting. Wrap your heating pad or warm water bottle in a towel to help prevent burns. Cold compresses also can help ease pain. Limit the time you use heat or cold.

## **When to Call Your Health Care Professional**

If you have severe back pain, or if the pain goes on for more than 2 weeks, call your **obstetrician-gynecologist (ob-gyn)** or other **obstetric care provider**. He or she will want to rule out other causes of the pain.

### **What conditions can cause back pain?**

Back pain can be a sign of some pregnancy **complications**. For example, back pain can be a symptom of **preterm** labor. Pain also can be a sign of a **urinary tract infection (UTI)**. Contact your ob-gyn or other obstetric care provider if, in addition to back pain, you

- have a fever
- feel burning during urination
- have vaginal bleeding

### **What if it's not an infection or preterm labor?**

Once other causes for your pain are ruled out, your ob-gyn or other obstetric care provider may recommend that you see a rehabilitation specialist or a physical therapist. He or she also may recommend a maternity girdle or brace if you aren't already using one.

## **Exercising for Back Health**

Most exercises for back health can be done at home without any special equipment. As with any physical activity, protect yourself from injury while doing exercises.

### **What can back exercises do for me?**

Exercises for the back can

- strengthen and stretch the muscles that support your back and legs
- promote good posture
- keep the muscles of the back, abdomen, hips, and upper body strong
- help ease back pain
- help prepare you for labor and childbirth

### **What exercises can I do for back health?**

See the “Exercises for a Healthy Back” section for step-by-step instructions on how to keep your back healthy during pregnancy.

### **Is it okay to walk during pregnancy?**

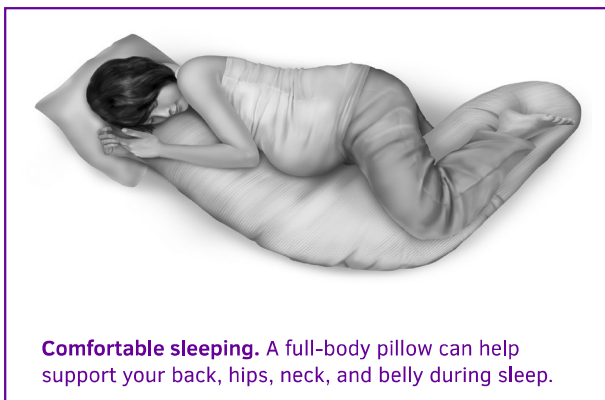
Yes. Walking is generally safe during pregnancy and is great for the back. Wear walking shoes or tennis shoes that fit well and give good support, flexibility, and cushioning.

### **Is swimming a safe form of exercise?**

Water exercise can be especially helpful for back pain. The water supports your weight so you avoid injury and muscle strain. Many women swim right up to the end of their pregnancies.

### **What about other types of exercise?**

If you have no complications that prevent you from doing so, staying active during pregnancy reduces back pain and increases your ability to go about your daily activities. Always talk with your ob-gyn or other obstetric care provider before starting or changing an exercise program during pregnancy.



**Comfortable sleeping.** A full-body pillow can help support your back, hips, neck, and belly during sleep.

## Exercises for a Healthy Back

Before doing any of these exercises, talk with your ob-gyn or other obstetric care provider to make sure they are safe for you. Doing these exercises should not cause pain. If you have pain, stop doing the exercise. Breathe deeply with each movement.



### Back Press

1. Stand with your back against a wall with your feet 10 to 12 inches away from it.
2. Press the lower part of your back against the wall.
3. Hold for 10 seconds, then release. Repeat 10 times.

### Upper Body Bend

1. Stand with your legs apart, knees bent slightly and hands on your hips.
2. Bend forward slowly, keeping your upper back straight, until you feel a stretch of the muscle along the back of your upper thigh (hamstring). Repeat 10 times.



### Standing Back Bend

1. Stand with your palms on the back of each hip.
2. Slowly bend backward about 15 to 20 degrees.
3. Hold for 20 seconds. Repeat 5 times. Do not bend your neck back too far. If needed, you can hold on to a chair for support.

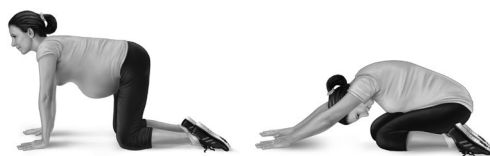
### Rocking Back Arch

1. Kneel on your hands and knees with your weight evenly distributed and your back straight.
2. Rock back and forth for a count of 5.
3. Return to the start position and curl your back up as far as you can. Repeat 5 to 10 times.



### Backward Stretch

1. Kneel on your hands and knees with your knees 8 to 10 inches apart and your arms straight. Your hands should be under your shoulders.
2. Curl backward slowly, tucking your head toward your knees and keeping your arms extended.
3. Hold for 5 seconds then return to all fours slowly. Repeat 5 times.



### Back Leg Stretch

1. Kneel on your hands and knees with your weight evenly distributed and your arms straight. Your hands should be under your shoulders.
2. Straighten your left leg back but keep your foot on the floor. Do not swing your leg back or arch your back. Repeat this movement 5 to 10 times on each side.



## Your Takeaways

1. Backache is one of the most common discomforts of pregnancy.
2. Good posture and safe exercise can reduce pain and strengthen back muscles.
3. Self-care can include applying heat or cold to sore muscles.
4. Contact your ob-gyn or other obstetric care provider if your back pain is severe or it lasts longer than 2 weeks.

## Terms You Should Know

**Complications:** Diseases or conditions that happen as a result of another disease or condition. An example is pneumonia that occurs as a result of the flu. A complication also can occur as a result of a condition, such as pregnancy. An example of a pregnancy complication is preterm labor.

**Hormones:** Substances made in the body by cells or organs that control the function of cells or organs. An example is estrogen, which controls the function of female reproductive organs.

**Ligaments:** Bands of tissue that connect bones or support large internal organs.

**Obstetric Care Provider:** A health care professional who cares for a woman during pregnancy, labor, and delivery. These professionals include obstetrician-gynecologists (ob-gyns), certified nurse-midwives (CNMs), maternal-fetal medicine specialists (MFMs), and family practice doctors with experience in maternal care.

**Obstetrician-Gynecologist (Ob-Gyn):** A doctor with special training and education in women's health.

**Preterm:** Less than 37 weeks of pregnancy.

**Urinary Tract Infection (UTI):** An infection in any part of the urinary system, including the kidneys, bladder, or urethra.

**Uterus:** A muscular organ located in the female pelvis that contains and nourishes the developing fetus during pregnancy.

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