



## Fact sheet Caring for your back during and after pregnancy

**Back pain is very common. During pregnancy 47% of women, and in general 80% of Australians at some stage of their lives have back pain. Just because it is common, it does not mean that it is normal to have back pain.**

Recent studies show that there are links between back pain and incontinence, and suggest that the links are because of the relationship between the back, abdominal and pelvic floor muscles and how well each area is working.

There are different kinds of back pain that can be experienced. These include:

- **Aches**

Often the muscles get tired or ache, particularly towards the end of the day. This kind of pain is often due to posture and the activities which you are doing during the day. If your abdominal muscles are weakened (eg. during or after pregnancy) there will be more strain placed on your back throughout the day. Refer to the fact sheet *Pregnancy and post natal abdominal muscle bracing* to learn how to strengthen your muscles safely during and after pregnancy. You may also be bending over, using your back rather than bending your knees and hips, using your stronger leg muscles.

Often paying attention to these things – your posture, bending your knees and lifting correctly, and bracing your abdominal can help reduce this type of pain.

- **Sharp, pinching or catching pain**

You should not continue to put up with any pain of this nature. Rather than applying general advice (although the above tips may still be helpful) in this situation, you should seek professional advice regarding what is causing the pain and specific treatment options available.

- **Numbness or tingling or pain moving down into your leg**

This indicates irritation to, or pressure on, the nerves from your back. You should quickly seek advice from your doctor, physiotherapist or other health professional if you develop this problem. Do not ignore it and hope that it will just go away.

Please note: This information is *not a substitute* for seeking professional advice if you already have, or begin to develop, a back problem.

### What can you do if you have a backache?

- **Use a hot pack**

Do not use a hot pack if you have recently hurt your back or had an injury, seek professional advice instead.

The heat from a hot pack can help to improve the blood flow to your aching muscles and help them to relax. There are different forms of hot packs which you can use. It is important to make sure that you don't have it too hot. It should just feel comfortably warm while you are using it against the area that is aching. You can use heat for up to 15–20 minutes at a time, even as often as every 3–4 hours.

- **Check your posture**

If you stand and let your tummy sag there will be more strain against your back. Stand tall and think strong and firm in your waist area as you hold your baby or stand in one position for any period of time. Use your muscles to hold you up and they will become stronger and a greater support for your back. Your shoulders should be pulled back and slightly down, your chin tucked in and your knees gently fixed, not pushed back.

- **Bend, bend, brace**

Bend your knees, bend your hips, and brace your abdominals to protect your back as you reach down to drawers, into cupboards, pick things up from a low height or lift heavy objects. Make a habit of doing this throughout the day and it will reduce the strain on your back. As an added bonus you will also develop stronger and more toned thighs!

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- **Have a massage**

Get a friend or your partner to gently massage the area. This helps to improve the blood flow to the area and relax the muscles. If you really feel like spoiling yourself, book yourself in for a massage from a professional, but if you are pregnant make sure they have experience with pregnancy massage techniques.

- **Relaxation**

Relaxation can help your muscles to relax, which means less tension in your back and like massage, improved blood flow to the muscles.

- **Check the height of your equipment**

Bending over low pram handles, a change table or high chair can give you a backache. So can picking up baby capsules regularly.

If you are pregnant, think about these things when purchasing your equipment so that you don't run into these problems when your baby is born.

- **Try some stretches**

One that you can do if you are pregnant or have had a baby is the 'cat stretch', which is described in most pregnancy exercise programs. On your hands and knees, curl your back like a cat, hold this stretch for as long as comfortable then move back into the starting position. Repeat 4 to 10 times, providing that this feels comfortable and you get NO pain with this exercise.

- **Seek professional advice**

If you have constant aching or a problem which persists, seek the advice of your doctor, physiotherapist or other health professional. Continuing to put up with problems can wear you down. They don't just go away by themselves as most people think they will.

- **Check your posture**

Do you ever get an aching back at the end of the day, or sore neck muscles? Sometimes when you get tired, it is hard to maintain good posture. This can add up to more aches and strains on your tired muscles. Try some of the following reminders and ideas to lift yourself up again.

- **Imagine a string attached to the back of your head, and someone gently lifting it up**

Feel your spine gently lengthening from the neck to your upper back and then your lower spine, lifting up one vertebra at a time.

- **Compare slouching with sitting or standing tall**

Slouch and feel this position, then sit or stand up straight. Then repeat this four more times, until you can really feel the difference in being in an upright position.

- **Sit on your 'sit bones'**

Your 'sit bones' are the two bony points under the cheeks of your bottom

It is a common mistake when you sit to roll back, resting on your tailbone with a curved lower back. This puts pressure on the joints of your back, pelvis and tailbone and contributes to the development of pain. When you sit on your 'sit bones' your back is in a much better position than when you slouch.

- **Lie down if you are tired rather than slumping**

If you are very tired and it is difficult to keep your body in a good sitting position at the end of the day, it might be better to lie down on the couch to read or watch television, rather than sit in a slumped position.

## Treatment options are available

Treatment options are available if you have back or pelvic joint pain during or after pregnancy.

In the past you may have been told that there "isn't anything that you can do" but with more recent developments there are a number of treatment options that your health care provider can offer.

It is recommended that you seek treatment for the problem as soon as possible.

Treatment may include:

- Massage
- Mobilisation of your joints
- Strapping or taping your pelvic joints
- Using a support belt
- Specific hip and lower abdominal stabilising, and pelvic floor muscle exercises
- Postural and exercise advice
- Home massage, stretches and exercises

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## General tips and advice

- Symmetry is very important – keep your body in STRICT alignment at every possible opportunity.
  - Stand evenly with weight on both legs
  - Keep your toes pointing forwards/straight (eg. while standing at the sink, driving in the car, sitting down)
- Sleeping position – lie on your side with one pillow between thighs and one or more pillows under your top lower leg, to keep your alignment – keep knees in alignment/opposite each other to avoid pelvis rolling forward or backwards.



## Avoid

- Fast walking or too much walking
- Crossing legs
- Sitting on couch with knees rolled out
- Lying on back
- Breast stroke kick when swimming
- Steps where possible
- Wearing high heeled shoes
- Step aerobics
- Twisting
  - When getting in and out of a 4WD
  - While doing housework such as vacuuming or mopping
  - When pushing heavy shopping trolleys
  - While doing your buttock stretches
- Sustained, strong stretches around the buttock or pelvis area unless advised by your health care provider

**Maintain good posture at all times.**