

# GROWING PAINS

*Pregnancy brings momentous physical changes to a woman's body—not all of them welcome. But with the right treatment, and a little caution, it's possible to be comfortable, writes*  
**REBECCA WILLIAMSON**

When it comes to pregnancy, there are often two distinct camps: the glowing and energetic mums-to-be, sans aches and pains, and the bone-tired, can-barely-walk women who are counting down the days until their body is no longer held hostage.

Of course, it's entirely possible to see-saw from one team to the next on a daily basis: it's all part of the rollercoaster that is pregnancy. But while all expectant mums experience a myriad of changes to their bodies, including weight gain, softening of the joints and breathlessness, some experience debilitating pain. Conditions such as symphysis pubis dysfunction, sciatica or carpal tunnel syndrome can turn a beautiful time in your life into an experience you'd rather forget.

Up to 80 per cent of women suffer back pain in pregnancy – and that's just one area of the body. Hormones are usually to blame. When a baby is on board, the hormone relaxin runs rampant through the body, loosening up joints, muscles and ligaments in preparation for birth. Another contributing factor, besides obvious weight and posture changes, is the extra fluid retained: a mum-to-be carries 50 per cent more blood and fluid than a non-pregnant woman.

Osteopath Jin Ong of Metamed says previous injuries or weaknesses in the body can often lead to those niggly or unbearable aches and pains. "If you're planning a pregnancy, I recommend getting treatment beforehand to identify if you have any issues. If you have any weaknesses in the body, these can be exacerbated in pregnancy. Our bodies have the ability to compensate for issues so we don't actually feel pain or discomfort until we aren't coping, which is often too late."

Jin says problems tend to present at around the 22-week mark, particularly if a woman has no pre-existing musculoskeletal disorders. The good news, however, is that most ailments disappear as soon as – or not long after – the baby is born.

It's another reason why mum-of-two Leanne Saunders can't wait for her third child to arrive. She has been suffering from symphysis pubis dysfunction (SPD), a painful condition which affects one in 300 women, for much of her pregnancy.

"I didn't experience SPD with my first pregnancy but it has caused excruciating pain in my second and third pregnancies," she says. "The pain is in my pelvis, particularly the pubic bone. It feels like someone has kicked me and the bones are breaking. Sometimes it's a dull ache and other times it will take my breath away, but it's always there."

During her second pregnancy, Leanne had to give up her job as a warehouse storeperson due to the pain. "This time around I'm managing it by resting as much as possible, not moving too quickly and taking lots of lukewarm baths."

Treatments such as osteopathy, massage, acupuncture, chiropractic, and physiotherapy can help alleviate the symptoms of SPD and other conditions, and are generally considered safe in pregnancy. While some practitioners – particularly massage therapists – tend to avoid treating pregnant women in the first 12 weeks due to the risk of association with spontaneous miscarriage, others may avoid certain areas of the body or slightly modify their techniques. Because of this, it's essential to choose a specialist who is knowledgeable and experienced in treating pregnant women.

"Osteopathy is hands on and very safe in pregnancy," says Jin. "I personally use a bit of acupuncture/dry needling which is great for getting to the muscles without stirring up the joints. We also have a very holistic approach in listening to the mind-body connection and how the body can be a manifestation of our emotional experiences."

Depending on your diagnosis, other remedies can include heat and ice packs (wheat packs or a bag of frozen peas can work wonders), specialised pregnancy belts, support bandages and hydrotherapy (immersing your body or a body part in hot or cold water).

Nikki Sparrow found ice-cold water to be particularly helpful in her quest for relief from carpal tunnel syndrome, which she was diagnosed with at 16 weeks.

"I was working as a caregiver and noticed my wrists were becoming very painful at the end of long shifts," she says. "They started to swell and the pain was almost constant. It made working very difficult – trying to dress grown men in wheelchairs was extremely hard as my hands had no strength."

Nikki's symptoms became worse in the →

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tingling in one or both wrists, hands or fingers. This is often caused by extra fluid putting pressure on the carpal tunnel, a narrow passageway in the wrist. A GP, osteopath, physiotherapist or naturopath can help.

#### Restless leg syndrome

Restless legs and sudden painful cramps are common in pregnancy, particularly in the third trimester. Hormonal and circulation changes are often the culprits, as are dehydration or deficiencies in minerals such as iron or magnesium. Try stretching, heat packs, massage or upping your water intake.

#### Symphysis pubis dysfunction

Symphysis pubis dysfunction is caused by the natural softening of the ligament that holds the two front bones of the pelvic ring together. While it can present early on in pregnancy, it usually intensifies in the weeks leading up to birth. A doctor, physio, osteo or chiropractor can prescribe the correct treatment, which may include remedies such as a maternity belt or medication.

#### Back/sacroiliac pain and sciatica

Back pain – particularly in the lower back and sacroiliac joint – is one of the most common pregnancy complaints. It's generally down to a combination of the relaxin hormone and a growing baby shifting your centre of gravity. Pregnancy belts can help the muscles stabilise and ease the day-to-day pain, and an anti-inflammatory diet combined with pregnancy-safe abdominal and stability exercises or pregnancy pilates can also improve symptoms.

#### Oedema

Oedema is the swelling of the face, hands and feet. It's why the old adage that pregnant women should "put their feet up" rings true: elevating these areas, as well as gentle hand and foot exercises, ice packs and massage, can deflate the swelling. ■

#### Wise workouts

Most mums-to-be can safely exercise throughout pregnancy – it brings a long list of physical and mental health benefits for you and your baby and can help prepare your body for labour and birth. Lorraine Scapens of Pregnancy Exercise says a pregnancy-specific workout programme helps your body adapt to the various changes and challenges throughout the 40 weeks.

"The right exercise and posture can help prevent most pregnancy pains and discomforts," she says. "But if someone is experiencing pain, certain exercises that increase pelvic separation such as walking or lunges should be avoided, and instead the focus should be on corrective exercises which keep the pelvis still, such as swimming (only freestyle and backstroke, not breaststroke), cycling and some cross-trainer options."

Yoga or pilates can also be fantastic under the guidance of a pregnancy-trained instructor – but do keep in mind that certain poses can contribute to a wide diastasis (abdominal separation) and pelvic floor dysfunction (a downward dog puts more pressure on the abdominals than a basic crunch). "Remember that your body is now working 30 per cent harder and a 40-minute walk is the equivalent of a 60-minute walk non-pregnant," adds Lorraine. "I often recommend reducing intensity and volume by approximately 10-15 per cent each trimester. By the third trimester you may need to have reduced your volume and intensity by around 50 per cent."

such as the knees, hips, pelvis and back. Use a combination of heat and ice packs, light exercise, massage and stretching to alleviate the discomfort, or try acupuncture, osteopathy or physiotherapy.

#### Carpal tunnel syndrome

Carpal tunnel syndrome presents as pain or

late second and third trimesters, and she tried to keep on top of the pain by using ice packs and splints, as well as elevating her wrists or running them under cold water.

She didn't seek specialist help, however, as her midwife advised her "not much could be done" for the condition. It's something Jin hears every now and then, but strongly disagrees with.

"A lot of people just say, it's 'part of pregnancy' but I definitely think women can feel really healthy and comfortable in pregnancy," she says. "It's about making the body feel as best as it can feel as it changes during pregnancy. This is the time in your life that's about creating a stress-free environment for your baby to thrive."

#### Common conditions

##### Aches and pains

The anatomical and postural changes of pregnancy can spark pain around the joints,