

02/14/2005

Oh baby: Chiropractic advice for mothers-to-be

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As many new mothers can attest, the muscle strains of pregnancy are very real and can be more than just a nuisance. The average weight gain of 25 to 35 pounds, combined with the increased stress placed on the body by the baby, can result in severe discomfort.

Studies have found that about half of all expectant mothers will develop low back pain at some point in their pregnancies. This is especially true during late pregnancy, when the baby's head presses down on a woman's back, legs and buttocks, irritating her sciatic nerve. And for those who already suffer from low back pain, the problem can become even worse.

During pregnancy, a woman's center of gravity almost immediately begins to shift forward to the front of her pelvis. Although a woman's sacrum -- or posterior section of the pelvis -- has enough depth to enable her to carry the baby, the displaced weight still increases stress on her joints.

As the baby grows in size, the woman's weight is projected even further forward, and the curvature of her lower back is increased, placing extra stress on spinal discs. In compensation, the normal curvature of the upper spine increases, as well.

While these changes sound drastic, pregnancy hormones help loosen the ligaments attached to the pelvic bones. But even these natural changes designed to accommodate the growing baby can result in postural imbalances, making pregnant women more prone to having awkward trips and falls.

What can you do?

The American Chiropractic Association recommends the following tips for pregnant women:

- Exercise: Safe exercise during pregnancy can help strengthen your muscles and prevent discomfort. Try exercising at least three times per week, gently stretching before and after exercise. If you were not active before your pregnancy, check with your doctor before starting or continuing any exercise.

Walking, swimming and stationary cycling are relatively safe cardiovascular exercise for pregnant women because they do not require jerking or bouncing movements.

Be sure to exercise in an area with secure footing to minimize the likelihood of falls. Your heart rate should not exceed 140 beats per minute during exercise. Strenuous activity should last no more than 15 minutes at a time.

- Health and safety: Wear flat, sensible shoes. High or chunky heels can exacerbate postural imbalances and make you less steady on your feet, especially as your pregnancy progresses.

When picking up children, bend from the knees, not the waist. And never turn your head when lifting. Avoid picking up heavy objects, if possible.

Get plenty of rest. Pamper yourself and ask for help if you need it. Take a nap if you are tired, or lie down and elevate your feet for a few moments when you need a break.

- Pregnancy ergonomics -- Your bed and desk: Sleep on your side with a pillow between your knees to take pressure off your lower back. Full-length 'body pillows' may be helpful.

If you have to sit at a computer for long hours, make your workstation ergonomically correct. Position the monitor so the top of the screen is at or below eye level, and place your feet on a small footrest to take pressure off your legs and feet.

Take periodic breaks every 30 minutes with a quick walk around the office.

Before you become pregnant, your doctor of chiropractic can detect any imbalances in the pelvis or elsewhere in your body that could contribute to pregnancy discomfort or possible musculoskeletal problems after childbirth.

Many pregnant women have found that chiropractic adjustments provide relief from the increased low back pain brought on by pregnancy.

Chiropractic manipulation is safe for the pregnant woman and her baby and can be especially appealing to those trying to avoid medications in treating their back pain. Doctors of chiropractic can also offer nutrition, ergonomic and exercise advice to help a woman enjoy a healthy pregnancy.

Chiropractic care can also help after childbirth. In the eight weeks following delivery, the ligaments that loosened during pregnancy begin to tighten up again. Ideally, joint problems brought on during pregnancy from improper lifting or reaching should be treated before the ligaments return to their pre-pregnancy state to prevent muscle tension, headaches, rib discomfort and shoulder problems.