

# Management of Pelvic Pain During Pregnancy

*Rachael Burke*

Next to lower back pain, pelvic pain is one of the most common complaints in pregnant women. In particular pain felt at the front of the pelvis (over the pubic bone). This condition is commonly referred to as symphysis pubis dysfunction

The symphysis pubis joint is a stiff joint, reinforced by ligaments, which joins the two halves of your pelvis together at the front. The role of the symphysis pubis joint normally is to keep the pelvic bones steady during activity. Although a small amount of movement at the symphysis pubis joint is normal it's main function is to help in stabilising the pelvis. The symphysis pubis joint is further strengthened by the surrounding abdominal muscles.

During pregnancy, hormones soften and stretch the ligaments of the pelvis to provide the flexibility needed for giving birth.

Symphysis pubis dysfunction occurs when the joint becomes sufficiently relaxed through lengthening and weakening of the ligaments and surrounding muscles to allow instability of the pelvis.

## **Symptoms of Symphysis Pubis Dysfunction**

- Pain in the region of the symphysis pubis
- There may be associated lower back pain
- There may be pain radiating to the groin or inner thigh on either (or both) side(s)
- Women may also hear or feel a clicking or grinding sensation in the joint
- Pain is made worse with movement, especially those movements involving lifting one leg such as ascending or descending stairs
- Pain is often worse when rising from a chair
- Pain turning in bed
- Difficulty walking resulting in a “waddling” gait

Due to the decreased ability to endure standing and walking, women with symphysis pubis dysfunction during pregnancy often face major dysfunctional difficulties resulting in a decrease in quality of life.

## What to do

- Pelvic floor exercises from early pregnancy are thought to reduce the risk of developing symphysis pubis dysfunction
- Stabilising exercises have been shown to increase stability of the pelvis and decrease symptoms (see suggested exercises below)
- There is increasing evidence that the use of acupuncture in conjunction with stabilising exercises is effective in decreasing the symptoms of symphysis pubis dysfunction.
- Your physiotherapist should be able to advise you on self management and activities to avoid (see below for suggested self help)

## Suggested Exercises (Adapted from Depledge et al (2005))

1. Abdominal stabilization: sit with your feet resting on the floor; gently pull in your lower abdominal muscles as if you are hugging your baby. Hold for 5 seconds. Repeat 5 times, continuing to breathe normally
2. Pelvic floor: sit tall, squeeze to close around your openings. Lift and hold for 5 seconds. Repeat 5 times. Breathe normally throughout
3. Gluteus maximus muscle: sit or stand, squeeze buttocks together. Hold for 5 seconds. Repeat 5 times.
4. Latissimus dorsi muscle: sit on a chair in front of a table or a closed door. Grasp door handle or table with both hands and pull toward you. Hold for 5 seconds. Repeat 5 times.
5. Hip adductor muscles: sit down; put your fist or a rolled towel between your knees. Squeeze knees together. Hold for 5 seconds. Repeat 5 times.

## Suggested Self Help (Adapted from Depledge et al (2005))

### When getting in to bed:

- Sit on the edge of the bed, keep knees close together, then lie down on your side, lifting both your legs up sideways. Reverse this to get out of bed.
- Do not attempt to pull yourself up from lying on your back.

### When rolling over in bed:

- Keep knees together
- Do not roll with your knees apart

### When getting up from a chair:

- Keep knees close together; put your hands on your knees, and lean nose over toes to stand up.

### When sitting down:

- Do the reverse to sit down
- Ensure that you feel the chair at the back of your legs first.

When getting into a car:

- Sit down first and then swing legs in, keeping knees together

When walking:

- Take smaller steps

When using stairs:

- Step up sideways one step at a time
- Avoid stairs where possible.

Remember to:

- Sleep with a flat pillow between the legs
- Take rest breaks
- Move within the limit of pain
- Sit with folded towel under your butt so your hips are higher than your knees.

Avoid:

- Sitting on soft sofas and chairs
- Walking as an exercise
- Active stretching and exercising with legs apart (eg, squatting, sitting cross-legged, or breaststroke when swimming)

Symptoms commonly disappear shortly after giving birth. However, some women can suffer several months afterwards.

Pain and functional difficulties resulting from symphysis pubis dysfunction can be reduced if the condition is diagnosed early and the pregnant woman is given accurate information and managed appropriately.

## References

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