

# Low Back Pain during Pregnancy

## What is low back pain?

Low back pain is pain and stiffness in the lower back. It is very common during pregnancy. It can interfere with your normal daily activities.

## What is the cause?

Low back pain is usually caused by a strain of the ligaments or muscles that support the backbones (spine). Pregnancy hormones weaken and loosen ligaments and muscles to help the body get ready for delivery of the baby. When these muscles or ligaments are weak, it is easier to strain them and get back pain.

Low back pain can have many other causes. For example, it may occur from lifting and carrying heavy objects, from sitting or standing in one position, or from bending over the wrong way. During pregnancy back pain often occurs because of:

- A change in the body's center of gravity as the baby and your abdomen get bigger
- Poor posture
- A loosening of the muscles and ligaments during pregnancy before you are ready to deliver the baby
- The pressure that the growing baby puts on blood vessels and nerves in the pelvis and back

Often, back pain during pregnancy is the result of poor posture. When you are pregnant, you may tend to throw your stomach forward, which can cause back muscle aches.

## What are the symptoms?

Symptoms include:

- Pain
- Stiffness
- Weakness
- Limited motion of the back or legs

The pain may be continuous or it may occur just in certain positions. You may have it only in one spot or it may spread to other areas, such as down the buttocks and thigh.

## How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will review your medical history and examine you. In some cases you may have an imaging procedure such as X-rays or an MRI to get a better look at your back and spinal cord. However, X-rays are generally avoided to keep from exposing the baby to radiation. An MRI is considered safe to do during

pregnancy. It uses a strong magnetic field and radio waves instead of radiation for the scan.

## **How is it treated?**

Here are several ways you might treat low back pain:

- Put a heating pad set on low or a covered hot water bottle on your back while you are awake.
- Rest in bed on a firm mattress.
- Take pain medicines or muscle relaxants that are safe during pregnancy and recommended by your healthcare provider.
- Have your back massaged by someone trained in massage.
- Wear a belt or corset designed to support your back.
- Talk to a counselor if your back pain is related to tension caused by emotional problems.
- Follow a program of physical therapy or exercise recommended by your healthcare provider. Your provider will recommend a program that is safe and easy for you to do while you are pregnant.
- Some alternative treatments include acupuncture and chiropractic treatment.

Back pain that gets worse despite treatment or that involves your legs may be a sign of a more serious problem and should be checked by your healthcare provider.

## **How can I take care of myself?**

In addition to the treatment described above, keep in mind these suggestions:

- Lie on your side, with a pillow between your legs.
- Sleep without a pillow under your head.
- Sleep on a firm mattress or put a plywood board between your mattress and box spring.
- Gain only as much weight during your pregnancy as recommended by your healthcare provider.
- Wear low-heeled shoes while you are pregnant.
- Do not stand for long periods of time. If you must stand for long periods of time put one foot up on a box or stool. Change to the other foot resting on the stool frequently.
- When you lift something, bend from your knees, not your waist.
- Exercise during pregnancy to strengthen your muscles and joints.

## **How can help prevent low back pain?**

You can reduce the strain on your back by doing the following:

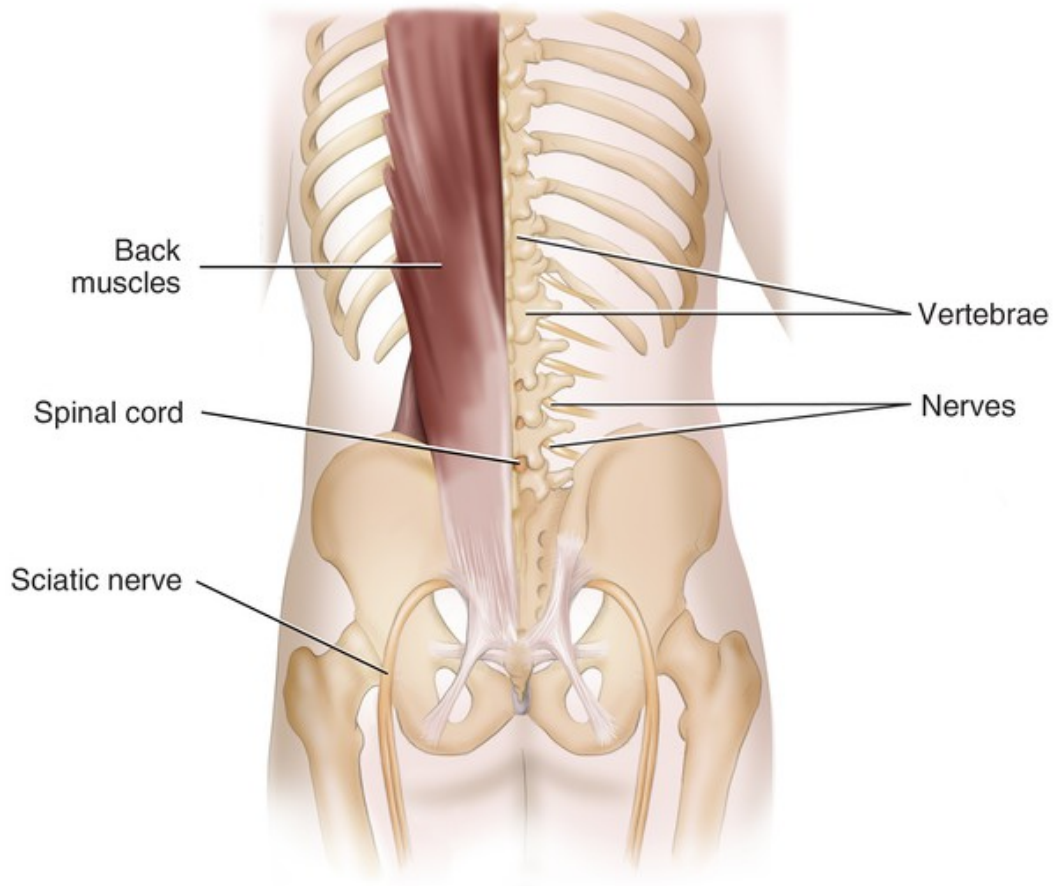
- Practice good posture. Stand with your head up, shoulders back and straight, chest forward, pelvis tucked in, and stomach pulled in.

- Don't push with your arms when you move heavy objects. Push backwards so the strain is taken by your legs.
- Whenever you sit, sit in a straight-backed chair and hold your spine against the back of the chair.
- Bend your knees and hips and keep your back straight when you lift a heavy object. Avoid lifting heavy objects higher than your waist.
- Hold packages you carry close to your body, with your arms bent.
- Bend your knees and squat when you lean over.
- Sit at least 10 inches away from the steering wheel when you drive and use your seat belt and a hard backrest or pillow.
- Lie on your left side with your knees bent when you sleep or rest.

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