

## **Motherhood and Back Pain**

By Dr. Valerie Lavigne, d.c.

How many mothers and mothers-to-be do you know who complain of back pain? Quite a few, I'll bet. As a new mother and a chiropractor, I can attest to the toll pregnancy and motherhood put on the back. A study in the journal Orthopedics reported that 50 to 90 per cent of pregnant women will likely experience lower back pain. Normally this pain diminishes after birth but it can persist, especially if preventive measures are not being taken.

There are two essential elements connected to the health of a spine: mobile vertebrae and a properly functioning nervous system. Vertebrae are responsible for the motion of the back, and problems occur when repetitive movements, poor posture, pregnancy, or trauma compromise this motion. Vertebrae also surround and protect the nervous system, so when an area of the back is not moving properly the nervous system is also jeopardized.

Back pain is caused by an accumulation of stress on the joints that can be triggered by an action as simple as picking up your child. As a reaction to the trigger, the body swells or becomes inflamed in that area, causing sharp pain. Back muscles also contribute to the pain by becoming tight or spastic in an effort to protect the spine. During pregnancy and afterwards, the body experiences many changes that can lead to back pain. Here's why:

**Pregnancy:** There are three curves in our spine - in the neck, the mid-back and the lower back. The significant weight gain that occurs during pregnancy adds more pressure to the lower back and causes its curve to become more acute. The joints then have a greater potential to become inflamed and cause pain. The same applies to the neck and mid-back because of the increase in breast weight that pulls on the shoulder muscles. There is also an increase in the hormone relaxin, which causes ligaments to relax in preparation for the delivery. Its presence also creates abnormal motion in many joints, causing them to become inflamed.

**Post-partum:** Back pain can persist after birth. The loss of pregnancy weight once again causes a drastic change in the curve of the lower back. There is also the loss of the relaxin, which as it leaves the body tends to make ligaments tighter. This can cause the sacroiliac joint, the one used when bending forward to pick up a baby or get up from a chair, to not move as well as it should and create pain. Therefore, it is very important to verify that there is proper mobility in the pelvis area after delivery.

**Infant and toddler years:** Once the baby is born, there are countless mom-related daily activities, whether it is hoisting a car seat, wrestling with a stroller, carrying your toddler, vacuuming, or doing the laundry, that can cause your back to be strained.

Stiffness, usually in the morning, is the first symptom, and warning sign, that the pain may be a chronic problem. Don't ignore it! As mothers constantly in motion, it is nearly

impossible to not put some stress on our backs. There are ways, however, to prevent back pain and keep our backs working as optimally as possible.

Tips for a healthy back:

- Carry a backpack instead of an over-the-shoulder bag, especially if you are filling it with diapers, wipes, bottles, snacks, sippy cups, etc.
- When picking up your child, bend at the knees and bring your child close to your centre of gravity before lifting (this applies to lifting anything heavy). It is important not to hold the baby for prolonged periods on your hip because it will cause undue stress on the sacroiliac joints. It is much better to hold the child right against you with his legs wrapped around your waist equally.
- When reaching for something, make sure you don't twist from your lower back – try to keep your feet pointing in the same direction as you reach. Twisting is one of the worst motions for the lower back as it does not tolerate it well and can cause serious damage to the disks between the vertebrae, like a discal hernia.
- Front pouches are not harmful as long as the baby is not too heavy and you do not feel discomfort or pain. Try to get a pouch that has a strap around the waist so some of the weight is distributed away from the shoulders.
- Exercise is important! An important component for both pre- and post-natal periods is strong abdominal muscles. They will support your lower back and lessen stress. You can start by doing a low number of crunches and slowly build up. Additional exercises are available from most chiropractic clinics.

Tips if injury or pain occurs:

- Apply ice for 10 minutes and remove for 20 minutes.
- Do not apply heat, as this will increase swelling.
- Try not to stay in one position for a long time – keep moving whenever possible.
- Sleep on your side with pillows between your knees or on your back with your knees up.

If the pain persists, you may want to consult a chiropractor. Chiropractic treatment is a manipulation of the spine to help ease the pain of musculoskeletal problems.

The chiropractor will perform an evaluation of the spine through a multi-component examination. There is a postural exam that allows the chiropractor to see if there are muscular imbalances and abnormal curves in the back and assess the gross range of

motion in the lower back and neck to see how the joints are moving. The orthopedic exam narrows in on joints that are not working well. The neurologic tests verify motor strength and reflexes to see if the problem extends to the nervous system. Finally, the chiropractor will feel or palpate the motion of each joint of your back to find the problem area and verify muscle tension. She may also perform a radiological examination, to determine the degree of degeneration in the back, which will help with the prognosis and eliminate any risks during treatment.

The chiropractor will then work on the areas where there is a lack of motion and muscle tension by adjusting the vertebrae. The adjustment is not painful and creates that famous “crack” sound. The noise is caused by the accumulation of pressure in the liquid separating the two surfaces that make up the joints. By doing a quick move to open up the joint the liquid gets transformed into a gas and makes a pop. It is similar to the noise made by a can of soda opening and is definitely not the bones cracking.

The purpose of the adjustment is to restore motion, to reset the mechanism of the muscle spindles, which are needed for stretching and flexibility, and to trigger the secretion of endorphins, neurotransmitters in the brain with pain-relieving properties.

The chiropractor may also give you exercises to strengthen your back and keep it healthy.

No matter what, chronic back pain will simply not just go away. Even if the pain decreases, your motion will still not be as optimal as it was and the pain could easily be triggered again. Address the cause and you will feel much better.

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