

Physical Therapy Helps Alleviate Back Pain and Discomfort during Pregnancy

For many expectant women, back pain is a common side effect of pregnancy. As a woman progresses through pregnancy, extra weight, hormonal changes and postural changes result in increased stress on the lower back and sacroiliac joints (pelvis) contributing to lower back pain. What many women don't realize is that they don't have to suffer through this discomfort. Physical therapy is an effective way to strengthen the lower abdominal muscles, realign the joints and alleviate pain.

Ellen Bass, doctor of physical therapy with Kitsap Physical Therapy (who specializes in women's health), says the stress on the joints will only increase as the pregnancy progresses — which is why she recommends that women talk to their obstetrician if the pain persists. Many insurance plans cover physical therapy during pregnancy, but a referral is often required.

“Generally, if you start experiencing lower back pain that is not improving, you should see a physical therapist. Without physical therapy, there aren't many other options,” says Ellen.

Ellen Zehrung, who gave birth to her first child in June, says physical therapy helped her work all the way until labor. While she wanted to work for as long as possible, six months into her pregnancy, she began experiencing debilitating back pain.

“I would work all day on my feet for eight hours and then the next day, I would wake up with intense pain in my hips and lower back,” she says.

After her first visit with Bass, Zehrung immediately felt physical relief. Her ongoing treatment included manual adjustments to align the sacrum (pelvis), a specialized belt to provide joint support and exercises that she could do at home.

As the joints became stabilized, Bass later added aquatic therapy and exercises in KPT's pool. She also shared other techniques, such as how to stand at work for optimal joint support.

“As long as I consistently did the exercises at home, I didn't have any problems,” Zehrung says. “I was able to continue working and increase my hours to normal. And I generally felt more comfortable.”

Zehrung says that Bass became part of her pregnancy support system, sharing her knowledge and experience.

“She genuinely wanted to make me feel better, which means a lot,” Zehrung says.

Bass also advises pregnant women to strengthen their pelvic floor muscles before and after giving birth. The pelvic floor drops during pregnancy, which can cause postpartum problems. During physical therapy, she can instruct her patients how to do Kegel exercises properly.

She says that as many as 70 percent of women report lower back pain during pregnancy.

“Don't suffer in silence,” Bass says. “Physical therapy can help reduce pain and discomfort and get you through the pregnancy more comfortably.”

Kitsap Physical Therapy offers an array of physical therapy and specialty programs as well as preventative-care services. Women's health specialists are available at KPT's offices in Port Orchard, Bremerton, Silverdale, Poulsbo and on Bainbridge Island. For more information, go to kitsappt.com.

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