Musculoskeletal Dysfunction During Pregnancy and After Childbirth

What musculoskeletal issues are common during pregnancy and after childbirth?

Pregnancy and postpartum are times of great change for a woman - physically, emotionally, and hormonally. As the fetus grows during pregnancy, the musculoskeletal system is challenged by altered posture, muscle imbalances, and changes in spinal mobility. These changes may cause pain, difficulty with balance, and reduced activity. In the postpartum phase, physical changes experienced during pregnancy, childbirth, and caring for a newborn may result in joint, nerve and/or muscle strain.

What causes dysfunction during pregnancy and postpartum?

Fluctuating hormones in both pregnancy and postpartum may cause excessive joint motion and changes in posture. Muscles can become tight and fatigued, resulting in pain and difficulty with certain movements. Physical demands after childbirth such as breast or bottle feeding, lifting and carrying the baby, juggling household chores, and lack of sleep can make recovery from childbirth challenging during early motherhood.

Find a Physical Therapist near you using PT Locator at ptl.womenshealthapta.org
For more educational resources, please visit www.womenshealthapta.org/patients
Musculoskeletal Dysfunction During Pregnancy and After Childbirth

What are symptoms of musculoskeletal dysfunction during pregnancy and postpartum?

Symptoms of dysfunction may include numbness or pain in the pelvis, spine, hips, shoulders, ribs, arms or legs. Core muscle weakness can make getting in and out of a chair, car, and bed difficult. Stress placed on the pelvic floor muscles during pregnancy and childbirth may result in pelvic pain, constipation, urinary and/or bowel incontinence, and painful sex during pregnancy and postpartum.

How can Physical Therapy (PT) help?

Physical therapists (PTs) are skilled at evaluating and treating people with musculoskeletal problems and can be helpful in reducing symptoms experienced by women during pregnancy and postpartum. Some PTs have specialized training in obstetrics for women experiencing more complex issues during pregnancy and postpartum. Treatments may include hands on techniques to address joint or muscle pain, exercises for weak and tight muscles, safety instruction for recreational sports and exercise, and possible recommendations for lumbar/pelvic support corsets. Obstetric PTs can also provide guidance on pain management during pregnancy, labor and delivery, and postpartum specific to daily activities and childcare. Referral to a pelvic floor trained physical therapist may be recommended postpartum if a woman experiences pelvic pain or concerns related to her bladder, bowels, or sex.

Who should be referred to a Physical Therapist (PT) during pregnancy or postpartum? If you are experiencing...

- Pain in the neck, back, shoulder, arm, ribs, hip, pelvis and leg
- Nerve symptoms such as numbness in the arm, hand, and leg
- Difficulty walking or performing normal daily activities
- Weak or tight muscles, including abdominal weakness
- Desire to resume or start an exercise program

Find a PT that specializes in pregnancy and postpartum physical therapy care using the PT Locator. Visit PT locator at ptl.womenshealthapta.org.