

# Physical Therapy and Pregnancy

Pregnancy is often a time filled with excitement, awe, and nervous anticipation. Most women are thinking of names, planning nurseries, and picking out furniture. Few think of the vast physical changes that will soon take place. As the body structurally begins to accommodate the new life growing inside, it begins to affect the mother in ways she never thought possible. The mother gains weight in order to provide a nurturing environment and nutrition to her child. Ligaments relax to allow expansion of the pelvis in order to prepare for delivery. The cardiac, pulmonary, renal and gastrointestinal systems are working overtime in order to house this new life. All of these changes affect the mother's posture, strength, energy level, and overall sense of well-being.

Many mothers mistakenly think that pregnancy is a time to stop exercising and moving. On the contrary, pregnancy is the very time a mother needs to keep moving in order to prepare for the momentous event that is about to occur. Labor is called so, because it involves just that...physical labor. The body is about to undergo one of the most strenuous events that will require the mother to be in good physical condition. Appropriate exercise is key during these expectant nine months.

## **Common problems during the prenatal/postpartum periods:**

Discomfort can result from the many changes that are taking place. Some of the problems that can occur due to pregnancy are postural changes, low back pain, pelvic pressure, decreased control of bowel/bladder, sciatica (leg pain and numbness), leg cramps, carpal tunnel syndrome or other musculoskeletal issues. Following delivery, there can be continued issues with sacroiliac (SI) pain, weakened abdominal muscles, pain from an episiotomy or c-section scar, pelvic floor muscle weakness/pain causing urinary/fecal incontinence or pain during intercourse.

## **How can Physical Therapy help me?**

If you are encountering problems during your pregnancy don't despair because there are ways to help you through this time. A licensed physical therapist, specifically trained in women's health, can evaluate and address the physical issues affecting you. Some of the techniques a PT would use in alleviating these discomforts are postural awareness/education, individualized stretching and strengthening programs, soft tissue mobilization/myofascial release (types of massage), breathing exercises, bladder education and pelvic floor strengthening. A PT can also assist you in implementing an exercise regimen that is safe and easy to take part in no matter what your level of fitness. All of this is performed in concurrence with your OB/GYN's care. You must obtain a referral from your physician in order to receive therapy. It is important that your physical therapist maintain communication with your doctor during your treatments.

**What happens when I get there?**

The physical therapist will perform a thorough evaluation, which involves asking questions about your medical history, your symptoms and your goals. The PT will also complete a physical exam, assessing posture, strength, and range of motion of your arms, legs, neck and trunk. Your specific issues will then be evaluated further. You and your physical therapist will discuss your goals of therapy, and then establish an individualized plan of care to meet those goals. Great emphasis is placed on education regarding awareness of bodily changes that are occurring, safe activities to participate in, and to prevent many of the discomforts that can occur during the childbearing year. The overall goal of physical therapy during the childbearing year is to assist the new mother in having a comfortable and safe pregnancy, while actively preparing her for labor and delivery.