

Caring for your feet during pregnancy

There are many changes which your body will go through during pregnancy and one complaint which is often overlooked is foot pain. Women obviously gain weight whilst they are pregnant and the nature of where you carry your child alters your center of gravity completely. This will cause adjustments to weight-bearing and a completely new stance as well as walking with an altered gait. All of these things will put added pressure on both your knees and feet.

The two most common foot complaints experienced during pregnancy are over-pronation and edema. These can lead to pain in the heel, arch and/or ball of the foot. Pregnancy can also lead to varicose veins and painful leg cramping. It is therefore essential for pregnant women to take care of their feet during their pregnancy.

Edema in pregnancy

During pregnancy the body retains more water, which is natural, but as a result of this you are also more prone to edema (which is the collection of excess fluid within your tissues). Chemical changes (such as the increased production of progesterone) also exacerbate this process. Add to this your growing uterus, which puts increased pressure on your venous system, especially those within your legs. This causes the slow return of blood to the heart from the extremities, which leads to fluid being retained by the surrounding tissue (especially in your feet and ankles). You're most likely to suffer with this during the third trimester, if you're carrying excessive amniotic fluid or if you're carrying multiples. It also tends to be worse at the end of the day and when the weather is warmer.

When should you be concerned about swelling?

Call your midwife or doctor if you notice:

- excessive/sudden swelling of your feet or ankles as this could be a sign of preeclampsia.
- if you notice that one side of your body is significantly more swollen than the other, especially if you have any pain or tenderness in your calf or thigh. This could signal a vascular problems.

What can I do to minimize this?

- You can help relieve the increased pressure on your veins by lying on your side. Since the vena cava (which carries the blood back to your heart) is on the right side of your body, resting on your left side works best;
- Rest often and put your feet up whenever possible. When sitting it helps to keep a stool or pile of books to elevate your feet with;
- Don't cross your legs or ankles while sitting as this restricts circulation and will make the problem worse;

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- Stretch your legs frequently while sitting: Stretch your leg out, heel first, and gently flex your foot to stretch your calf muscles. Rotate your ankles and wiggle your toes. Try drawing the alphabet in the air with your toes;
- Take regular breaks from sitting or standing. A short walk every so often will help keep your blood from pooling in your lower extremities;
- Wear comfortable shoes that can accommodate any swelling in your feet; you may find that you need a size larger due to this so have your feet measured throughout your pregnancy. Foot wear which is too narrow or short will restrict circulation and make the problem worse. You may also want to consider trainers with good shock absorption if you are suffering from over pronation (see below);
- Don't wear socks or stockings that have tight bands around the ankles or calves. Make sure they are seamless;
- Try waist-high maternity support stockings. Put them on before you get out of bed in the morning so blood doesn't have a chance to pool around your ankles;
- Drink plenty of water. Surprisingly, this helps your body retain less water as it ensures you are not dehydrated and your body doesn't hold on to all the water that it can get;
- Exercise regularly, especially by walking, swimming, or riding an exercise bike. Or try a water aerobics class – immersion in water may temporarily help reduce swelling, particularly if the water level is up near your shoulders;
- Eat well. Foods high in potassium, such as bananas, will help to minimize swelling, and avoid junk food, these are usually high in salt and will only increase the problem. Caffeine is also something which you should avoid;

over pronation (also known as flat feet)

Chemical changes experienced during pregnancy include the loosening of ligaments within joints to allow the natural passage of child birth. However, as the chemicals are transported in the blood stream this chemical response is experienced throughout the body and can affect the joints of the feet, leading to dropped arches and over pronation. Over pronation is when the arch of the foot flattens during weight bearing and the foot rolls inwards during walking. This is often more pronounced in pregnancy due to the additional weight the body is carrying. This altered gait can also lead to stress on other joints, such as the knees, and cause inflammation on the plantar fascia (the fibrous band of tissue running from the heel to the ball of the foot).

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How to relieve over pronation

Wearing shoes which fit properly is paramount to relieving over pronation. Shoes with adequate arch support and medial rear foot posting will help to elevate the additional pressure placed on the foot. Wearing orthotics within the shoes can also treat the problem as it identifies the specific areas where support is required for that individual. Foot wear which provides shock absorption will not only benefit the over pronation but will take some of the pressure from other affected joints such as the knees. It is not only important to treat over pronation for pain relief but also to stop other conditions from developing, such as plantar fasciitis, callus build up and posterior tibial tendonitis. Paying attention to your posture can make a world of difference when it comes to foot comfort. Balancing your weight evenly on your feet, as well as keeping your shoulders back and your rib cage lifted, will regulate the pressure going to your feet.

Other problems you may encounter

The increase in body weight - and 'waddling' walking action to accommodate the bump - can sometimes cause foot problems, such as the build up of hard skin, corns and calluses. If the extra weight means your feet can't support your body properly, it can also lead to related pain in the knees, hips and lower back.

Hard skin is best dealt with through a regular foot-care regime. Pumice stones, foot files and exfoliating creams reduce hard skin build up and prompt healthy cell growth below. Regular application of moisturisers improves the skin's elasticity, helping to prevent the inflexibility and dryness that can cause rough, hard skin and calluses to form.

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