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## Simple Tips To Ease Pregnancy Pain

### SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Welcome to our session on simple tips to ease pregnancy pain insights from physical therapist. I'm Professor James Adams and with me today is Brooke Kalisiak, who's a physical therapist who works with pregnant women to try to help ease their pregnancy pain. Brooke, thanks so much for joining us today.

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Well, thanks for having me. I'm really excited to talk about this issue with you, you and your audience.

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I think a lot of women experiencing pain, we'll be glad to hear from you. Go ahead and tell us a little bit about your background and your experience working with pregnant women?

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Yes, I'd be happy to so I have been a physical therapist for the last 18 years and for the last 12 of those years, I've been specializing in women's health physical therapy or pelvic physical therapy. So I have a private practice in St. Louis, Missouri, where myself and my other therapists specialize in working with women in who are pregnant and postpartum and are dealing with issues such as pelvic pain to low back pain or bladder issues, other things related



to the pelvic area. And so I really find that there's a lot of helpful things that women can be doing to help ease their pains and not have to be suffering needlessly through their pregnancy. And it's one of my passion areas just to get out there and educate women more about what they can be doing to help themselves because I feel like unfortunately, so many women are either told or just think like, Oh, it's just a normal part of pregnancy. I'm just doomed to have some back pain during this. And you know, there really are some things that you can be doing for yourself to make a difference on that and make your pregnancy as comfortable and keep you as functional as possible so that you can actually enjoy it.

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Right, great. Well, we want to get into that sort of practical questions. But first, let me go ahead and ask what are some of the common reasons that women have pain during their pregnancy?

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So a woman's body when she's pregnant goes through many changes. And those changes can affect her basically from head to toe. So starting out with the hormonal changes that a woman undergoes during her pregnancy, those hormonal changes actually help to loosen up the joints and loosen up the connective tissue so that baby can grow and baby can make its way down into the birth canal when it's appropriate, but that loosening and laxity and can put more stress on the joints than was there before. So if we had any tendencies towards some bad postures or bad habits, or that they almost kind of get accentuated during pregnancy, and especially with the change of the growing baby, that puts a lot of forward pressure on the belly and in to counter that a lot of times, we see women their their upper trunk start to go backwards and so we kind of get this big s like curve and it puts a lot of stress and strain through the low back in the pelvis and even the upper back in neck. And so that coupled with the loosening and the laxity in the joints, and that can really wreak havoc on some areas, and we can start to get overuse issues, and that can lead into a little nagging aches and pains or can lead all the way up to a more severe issues, where I've worked with some pregnant women who are just having a hard time, even walking and doing their day to day activity, that their pain is so severe, so it really can fluctuate quite a bit for women.

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What are some of the most common types of aches and pains that they experience?

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Today, the most common is a pregnancy, low back pain. And then so low back pain can be very central around the spine, or a lot of women feel like it comes out to one side or the other. Like it's like it starts in the middle and kind of spreads out across their back or spreads down into their buttocks. A lot of women I'll describe it as they'll say, my baby sitting on my cyanotic nerve



and and that sciatic nerve is a big nerve that comes out from our spine and goes down our legs. So if you're getting any pain complaints that go down the leg, and that oftentimes it might be the sciatic nerve that's, that's the culprit with that. I'm here to tell you, your baby's not sitting on your sciatic nerve. But that's a good way to describe kind of the pain that you might be feeling with it. I'm gonna I do have my model with me here. So this is a model of our pelvis. And I wanted to show that our pelvis is one big ring that's made up of three bones. The two bones on the side of the hip bones are called the ilium. And in the back is called our sacrum. And so we have two big joints in the back called our sacrum iliac joints. And we have one joint in the front called our pubic symphysis joint. And remember, I just talked about that those joints all start to kind of loosen up and get a little bit more laxity to them. Well, these joints are held together by a lot of connective tissue called ligaments to kind of create the stability and when that starts to loosen up, we can start to shear or have more movement at these various joints. And that can be uncomfortable. And so the pubic symphysis is another place can really down low right in the front that women can feel the pain. Or they might describe their low back pain is feeling almost like it's down lower in their buttocks on either both side or one side. And that oftentimes is a sign that their SI joints might be involved because things are moving a little bit more. So I'd say the most common areas are the low back right below it in the buttocks, the SI joints, and then in the front, the pubic symphysis joints. Those are the most common areas that we see women who are pregnant complaining about aches and pains.

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Well, thanks very much. It's very informative. Well, let's talk about some of the things that can affect lower back or pelvic pain. So sleeping is one major issue. Many women have pain during sleeping or Towards Can you talk about what can be done to reduce that?

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Yes. So sleeping I don't know, I don't know of a single pregnant woman who by the third trimesters and like I'm not getting a solid night's sleep anymore, it just isn't happening and the changes that their body is going through can play a big role in that. But one of the ways that's or one of the things that's often problematic for pregnant women is again, that because things have kind of loosened up and maybe move more, they have a lot of trouble rolling over and doing bed mobility tasks. So just a simple aspect of going from one side to the other side in bed becomes very painful or hard to do for them. And so I have a couple of quick tips that I usually give people because most pregnant women are at some point in time there, they've transitioned over to sleeping on their side if they haven't been a side sleeper before. And so in that sideline position, if we don't have any type of supports, and I'll go into that a little But more detail, but if we don't have any supports, we start to get our spine to kind of curve to the side just to meet our bed. And so what I usually tell people are two areas where they need support. If they're laying on their side, one is a pillow between their knees to help keep the space in between their



knees. And that helps keep their pelvis in a nice neutral position. If our knees collapse, it's going to pull on our pelvis and pull on our back a little bit. So we want to keep our knees apart in a nice neutral position. And most people have heard about putting support there. The other place where I tell people to put support is to use a small towel roll. So like a small hand towel, and define, it's not the squishy part of your waist. So right above your pelvic bones, but below your rib cage, we've got that squishy part on our trunk. And that part is kind of the narrowest part on our body. And if we're laying on our side, again, it'll kind of dip down to get to the bed because our shoulders and our hips, which are the widest, will hit first and then the midsection will dip. So putting that support along there not only to just support the growing belly that's happening, but also to fill in the gap at the waist to there. So now you've got this nice straight line that's happening in a laying down position, versus a woman kind of curving to meet the bed. And so having that support there can be a lot more comfortable and make it a lot easier to potentially sleep on the side there.

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Well, good, thank you. That's very helpful and very practical advice. I'm sure a lot of women will want to go try that right away. Now one of the other biggest chooses, getting up from a sitting position sitting in a chair sitting in a couch. Can you make suggestions and how that can be easier for them?

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Yeah, definitely. And again, as we get as women are, their pregnancy is going further along and they're getting bigger that making that transitional type motion from a sitting to a standing position can be more and more challenging. So, a few things ahead of time is pick your seat wisely is first and foremost. So although the low squishy couch might look really comfortable to kind of sink into, think about how hard it might be to get up out of it. And then so I usually tell people to go for a firmer surface, not that it has to be a rock hard chair, but a chair or a couch that's got some more support. I'm gonna bring my pelvis model back again to show why. Because if I'm sitting on a really squishy couch, what's going to happen to my pelvis is as I kind of sit down on it, I'm just going to kind of sink into it and almost sit back onto my tailbone and kind of rock backwards into it. And this can put a lot of strain on those joints in the back and actually it puts them in a position where they kind of open up a little bit more. And so when we go to get up, we have to create that force in that closure around the joints to then rock forward. Be able to get up out of the chair. And if those joints are irritated, and now they've sat in kind of a forced open position and we try to get up, we can get some pain when we have to create that force to get up. So instead if you are going to sit on a couch or that, make sure that you can keep your feet firmly on the ground, and that might mean that you have to put a few pillows behind you on the couch so that you've got the support there. Also make sure that you're sitting on your sit bones. So those are the bony part of your buttocks there. So we have a sit bone on



each buttocks. So you should be able to feel that there. Most of the time, we tend to rock back and tuck back onto our tailbone, and that can open up the SI joints and make things feel a little bit more uncomfortable. But if we're sitting forward and upright, that can feel a lot more comfortable because we're creating this nice closure of our pelvic ring. And it makes it easier for us to transition and get up. Many pregnant women find that sitting on a ball is a much more comfortable option. So like a big exercise ball that's got some give to it and that it does a couple of things. One, it keeps our core muscles active, because if we aren't, we're going to fall off the ball. And two, it helps to make us actually sit upright again, because if we're slouchy on it, we're going to fall off the ball. So it can keep us in a better position to make it a little bit easier for people and to feel more comfortable. And then the actual act of giving up, I tell people, the technique that I recommend all the time is what I call belly butt and breathe. Which sounds kind of funny when I say it out loud there, but it's to keep people focused on three main things. One is their belly. And so what I mean there is that I want people to think about pulling in their tummy muscles around their baby like they're trying to give their baby a hug with their belly, that activates our deep abdominal muscles or deep core muscles. So that's the belly part. The butt part is giving your buttock muscles a squeeze like you're trying to pinch a penny between your butt cheeks. And that gives us stability from the backside. So now we've created stability in the front by activating our belly muscles, stability in the back by activating our buttock muscles. And then the third part is Breathe in, breathe out, exhale as you go to stand up, because so many women get stuck in a pattern of holding their breath, which can put a lot more stress through the system, because the holding of the breath might make it feel like it's easier, but it actually causes us to strain a little bit more. So that's my suggestion for the actual act of get up is engaged your belly muscles, engage your buttocks muscles, and breathe out as you stand up.

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Oh, thanks. So it's very specific and helpful information. And let's also talk about standing What do you think about good posture and what's good posture while standing.

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So posture is kind of an abstract sort of thought to it. That there There's some people subscribed to like this exact perfect posture and you've got to be in this great lineup or else you're in trouble. But in general, everyone's going to have their their posture that works best for them. But we can talk about some specifics that may be helpful, especially if you are dealing with pain. So like we talked about already, that our ligaments are really loosening up and that can let us kind of hang into ranges that we maybe haven't been into before. And what I mean by that is, you can let the belly part of you kind of hang forward more and you let the back part of you kind of hang backwards. We just sort of hang there. Instead of hanging on our joints. We want to think about staying up tall. A visual I give people a lot of times is to think like you are a puppet on a string. And you don't want your string all lacs and loose. You want someone pulling



your string up so that you're nice and elongated. If someone looked at you from your side, your ears would be in line with your shoulders would be in line with your ribcage would be in line with your hips in line with your feet. So we want this kind of nice straight line looking from the side, that means that we've got our core muscles in our trunk in its most optimal position to be able to do the work for you versus us kind of riding on our ligaments at the end of our ranges.

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Okay, great. So trying to maintain that very rigid strike position.

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to a point we're meant to move and be in all sorts of different positions. So don't get me wrong, it's not 100% of the time, I've got to be straighten up, right? And if I move out of this position, I'm going to be in trouble. It's a good starting point to be in. Okay. What we want to think about is, how are you spending the majority of your time? Are you spending the majority of the time where you're letting things kind of hang and you're not using your muscles well, or are you spending the time where everything's a little bit more activated, I like to think of it like for anyone who has ever played any type of like a competitive sport, you don't just stand around kind of waiting for something to happen, you're in a bit of a ready position to make a move to do something. So I played basketball and tennis. So mine was always kind of a leaning forward, I'm ready to kind of move. But my muscles were active and ready to do something for me. And that's kind of the same thing that I'm thinking of here. In terms of if we're wanting to support our trunk and with the growing baby there, that we want to have our core muscles active a little bit more, so that we've got that support there, that it's not just kind of loading onto the back in the pelvis.

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Okay, great. Thanks for clarifying that. And then um, let's say a woman is having pain during her pregnancy. What should she go ahead and consider a talking with a physical therapists going in for an exam, when should a woman considered that

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so that's a great Question. And because I had many a patient too has come to see us and frankly says I didn't even know physical therapy could help with this. I'm so glad I've come. And that's a common phrase that we get. And I'd like to back up from that for a minute and say that if you are dealing with pain or problems during your pregnancy, especially that are affecting your function, I see this a lot in women where it's their second or third pregnancy and they've got two young kids at home that they're trying to run after. And their back's killing them and they can't even take care of their kids the way that they want to and that and so it really can disrupt your day to day activities and your how you like to run your your daily life. If that's happening. There's



something you can do about it. So my first answer is don't don't take the answer of, you know, oh, you're pregnant, it's going to happen. You're just going to have to deal with the back pain because I've had way too many patients be told that you know, it's just A common part of pregnancy. You know, you're just it's normal, you'll you just have to deal with it. And so first and foremost, yes, back pain during pregnancy is common. But it's not normal. There are things that women can do about it so that you can have a healthy pain free pregnancy and not feel like you have to be worried about how you move. And so if it's at all affecting your day to day activities, that's a great time to partner with a woman's health physical therapist to basically take a look at how you move how you're doing certain activities, to make tiny little adjustments or suggestions to help get you pain free and moving better. And sometimes it's very simple suggestions, even some of the stuff that I've already talked about, you know, I've had women who haven't been able to sleep for weeks, and I give them you know, the suggestions, the sleeping suggestions that we just talked about, and they're like, oh, my goodness, this is amazing. And other times, it's more involved and there's things that we have to do to help kind of rehabilitate the muscles and get them supporting more. But it really can make a big difference to partner with a physical therapist to figure out how to help you move so that you're in less pain and you're able to do what you want to do.

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I think that's such an important point that women shouldn't have to live with this pain, they should try going to see a physical therapist and they may be able to help them.

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Yes, because one of the things that research has shown is that when women are dealing with low back pain during their pregnancy, they are at a much much higher risk for that to perpetuate on later in life. And so it is something that if you are dealing with it during your pregnancy, let's get that figured out. Don't just assume that you have to suffer with that because it puts you in a higher risk category for that to be problematic down the road for you as well. And low back pain is one of the most you know, diagnoses that costs us the most money in treatment throughout our lifetime for people. And so we know that this is a risk factor that's potentially setting people up for problems with it later on in life. And so if we can minimize that early on, we're setting them up for a better path down the road.

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So I think that's a very important point to make. And it's great to know that there's research behind that. And they really should try to take care of these problems right away. Um, in terms of in addition to alleviating pregnancy pain, can you talk about other reasons, a woman might want to see a pelvic physical therapist.



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Yes. And they may not be reasons that women are even aware of that one that they could get assistance for to, they wouldn't have necessarily thought that a physical therapist could help them with but if I bring back my model of the pelvis here again, so we were talking about it in terms of the bony aspect of it, but if I flip it up, so we look more at the bottom of the pelvic area, all of the muscles down here are this red pink color. So we have muscles that go around our anus, our vagina and our urethra. And they're collectively known as the pelvic floor muscles. And these muscles have many jobs. One of them's kind of supporting the bottom of the pelvis here, and they are also the muscles that most people know about in terms of helping us to make sure that we remain confident that we do not have bowel or bladder and bladder leakage issues. So these are the muscles that little kids learn to train and use when they're doing potty training. And unfortunately, sometimes we need to have some potty training in our adult lives to then then so many women during pregnancy or afterwards end up with some type of bladder leakage issue, and it oftentimes is as a result of the stress and strain that happens to the pelvic floor muscles during pregnancy. Another issue that we see in the pelvic area is what's called pelvic organ prolapse and that is an issue where some of some or one of the organs in the pelvic area. So the bladder, the uterus, the rectum, some of those organs start to tip or fall into the vaginal canal and a woman might feel pressure or see a bulge or something happening in the vaginal canal area or they feel a lot of heaviness or pressure when they're standing or doing activities with their kids. And still another issue yet that we see a lot of is someone dealing with any type of a pelvic pain issues, especially as it relates around pregnancy. We see women who are dealing with a tailbone pain issue. That's a common thing that can happen as an injury during childbirth. And afterwards, we see women who are dealing with pain with intercourse, that actual act of sex with their partner can become painful afterwards. As a result of many things. Sometimes it's the pelvic floor muscles aren't working the way that they should be. Sometimes they have scar tissue from an episiotomy or tearing during their delivery. Sometimes Even their c section scar, they've had a C section delivery, maybe contributing to it. So all of these things are, can be related back to a musculoskeletal issue. And that's where a physical therapist, that's our area of expertise is how, how does the mouth How do the muscles work and make our skeleton move? And how do we figure out what's going on that may not be moving correctly. I know a woman's health or pelvic physical therapist just has the added expertise of focusing on on this particular area.

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And it's great to know that there are specialists so not just your general physical therapists, but those who actually specialize in pelvic issues and women's health may be very helpful. And we often even be covered by their insurance plan.



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Yes, yes. So yeah, it is not a it's it is not a separate type of physical therapy that has specialized coverage under the insurance it is whatever your insurance plans physical therapy coverages This falls under that same umbrella. So it's not like oh, I have, I've never seen that in my insurance plan, I have to look at it now. It's just it's falls under the same coverage that physical therapy would fall under.

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That's great. That's great. And are there any other sort of recommendations that you would make for pregnant women to try to help them stay out of pain?

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So a good thing is really, first and foremost is to try and stay as active as you feel comfortable with. So sometimes with pregnancy, tend to have the attitude of Well, I'm eating for two and I'm growing and this is going to kind of let myself go and I'll deal with it afterwards. And really, that can set us up for some issues. So trying to be as active as you feel comfortable with. And a wide variety of activities are good. So research has shown that exercising through your pregnancy has so many benefits for you and your baby. And so really finding if if you're not an active person need to start very slow with it and consult with your healthcare provider about what's appropriate for you. But if you have been active already, you know, the vast majority of activities are okay to keep up with during your pregnancy. There may be a point where your body says I'm done with this one and we need to kind of scale back a little bit and keep it to a little bit gentler activity. But in general, I mean, if you're just going out there and walking you're doing or doing a gentle strengthening routine, prenatal yoga is a great way to move and feel comfortable, but it is pregnancy is not a time to feel fragile. Your body is doing amazing things. And so you know, continuing to be as active as you feel comfortable with it is a great way to make sure that you're doing as well as possible and if you find that you're having issues with being active the way that you want to or certain activities. Again, that would be a good time to partner up with the pelvic physical therapists to make sure that things are moving the way that you want to or should be.

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And you've mentioned several types of exercises or one favorite type that you would recommend for most women.

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My favorite type is the type that the woman will do. That sounds awful. But our lives are so busy for most women, especially if this is your second or third. So honestly, it's something that you like and enjoy and that you'll keep up with. And so, if I had to choose something, if someone



came to me and said, Hey, Brooke, I want to start up this program, I'm going to listen to whatever you tell me to do. I would say have them start with a gentle strengthening routine to make sure that they're building muscle strength throughout their entire body with a special focus of the muscles around the abdominal area. So a lot of women think that during your pregnancy, those just get stretched out and there's nothing you can do about them. But they they're still working for you. You want to make sure that they're working well and We're not just letting them get stretched out. Because again, if we can keep the muscles active during the pregnancy, it means that afterwards, they're going to bounce back a little bit more easily. And then so in the simplest form, one simple exercise that I think is helpful for our for all women during their pregnancy, because it can help afterwards very soon after the delivery to for recovery is just what I call a deep core activation exercise. So say you're a person who like Brooke, I'm just, I'm not an exerciser, that's not going to happen. This is something you can do in any position, kind of any time of day. And so in sitting, what I would recommend is that you're just sitting, you're going to take a nice easy breath in, and then as you exhale, I want you to again, think about pulling your belly and around your baby. And this time, if you can think about it to also doing what's called a Kegel exercise or a kigo exercise where you're contracting your pelvic floor like you're trying to help Hold back pee or gas. And so we do that on an exhale. And then I'm still holding mine right now while I'm talking to you, and I hold it for a few seconds. And then I let it go. And so I can do 5/10 reps of that a couple times a day. And I know that I'm activating my deep abdominal muscles and my pelvic floor muscles. And I'm doing it no good way because I'm not holding my breath. And I'm able to talk to someone while I'm doing it.

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Great, great. Well, thank you but just been a wealth of information you provide us with a lot of great practical advice for help with sleeping, getting up, good posture, and also bladder issues and other issues that may come up. And I think one of the most important messages as you say is that women shouldn't have to suffer from these issues they should, if they're having symptoms, go and see a physical therapist, and at least try a consult.

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Note that it's exactly right. And it may you may add, the person who's suffering they may have to be the one who Advocates for themselves that so to know that they may be the one who's bringing up that suggestion and so please know to advocate for yourself because you do not have to suffer needlessly with back pain or any other pain issues throughout your pregnancy.

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But will last issue to bring up as a can of partner or husband or other partner help with some of these issues?



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and other things would you recommend?

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Yes, partners can be very helpful. So different massage techniques or stretching techniques, helping to support the partner, especially in labor and delivery positions. So a lot of the education that we do with clients and patients can be directed towards Okay, here's something your partner can do to help you out and we've even had partners who come to the clinic and are learning techniques so that you know, they can take that home and practice it right away. So if you have a willing and able partner, then yes, by all means, let's get them involved. To help out with it as well,

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right? So if you're going to be spending many hours during woman's pregnancy giving massages, might as well learn how to do it right.

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There you go your partner. I'll thank you all that much for it.

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Great. Well, thank you so much for all your information.

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You're very welcome. Thanks for having me.

