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easing pregnancy discomforts ^[1]

Before you became pregnant, you probably thought that you had an understanding with your body: You were good to it, it was good to you. Now that you're expecting, however, you find that all bets are off. Your little bundle of joy is calling the shots, and your body is straining to accommodate. Feet are swelling, ligaments are stretching, veins are bulging, and hormones are raging. Simply put, you need help. Fortunately, relief is just a page away.

little cures for big discomforts

Itchy Skin:

As your skin stretches, it can become dry and itchy.

Relief Slather on moisturizer or cocoa butter after bathing, and avoid harsh soaps, which remove your skin's natural oils.

Frequent Urination:

Your growing uterus presses on your bladder.

Relief By four months, the uterus moves up, relieving the pressure. Meanwhile, keep drinking liquids and don't wait to urinate -- it can lead to a urinary tract infection.

Edema:

You may retain some fluid -- especially around your ankles and feet.

Relief Put your feet up, switch standing and sitting positions often, and don't cross your legs. If your rings get tight, put them on a chain and wear them as a necklace.

Varicose Veins:

Valves that propel blood start to soften, causing the blood to pool and form painful bulges.

Relief Avoid crossing your legs, standing in one position for too long, or wearing anything that cuts off circulation (like knee-high stockings). Support hose may also help soothe the aches.

Fatigue:

Hormonal havoc and the energy it takes to create a baby sap your strength.

Relief Rest often and avoid sugar and caffeine.

Leg Cramps:

Sluggish circulation causes painful knots.

Relief Gentle massage or stretching (with toes flexed, not pointed) can help relax the muscle. Try stretching your legs before bedtime.

Round-Ligament Pain:

Your ligaments stretch to support the growing weight of your womb, causing sharp pains from the top of your uterus down to your pubic bone.

Relief Get off your feet, and support your belly with a pillow when you're lying on your side. Warm baths are soothing too.

Hemorrhoids:

These swollen rectal veins result from hard-to-pass bowel movements.

Relief Try ice packs, sitz baths, or witch hazel compresses, and ask your doctor about a stool softener or suppositories.

Backaches:

Your shifting center of gravity and the increased natural curvature of your spine strain your back.

Relief Stand up straight, and be careful lifting. While sitting, elevate your feet, and use a pillow for the small of your back.

Increased Vaginal Discharge:

A clear to yellowish secretion, known as leukorrhea, helps flush bacteria from your vagina.

Relief Wear a light panty shield in your underwear to help you feel fresher, but don't douche or wear tampons.

Digestive Problems:

Pregnancy hormones slow some bodily functions, resulting in constipation, indigestion, bloating, and gas.

Relief Eat a diet high in fiber (whole grains, raw fruits and vegetables), drink plenty of liquids, and try to take a walk every day.

Nausea:

So-called morning sickness -- nausea that ranges from mild queasiness to frequent vomiting -- can last all day.

Relief Eat small, frequent meals high in protein and carbohydrates, and keep a few crackers by your bed to help settle your stomach before you get up in the morning.

Heartburn:

Your uterus presses on your stomach, causing acids to back up.

Relief Even when you're ravenous, eat slowly. Avoid greasy foods and stay upright after meals. Also, try eating yogurt or chewable calcium tablets.

Tender Breasts:

As your breasts rev up for breastfeeding, they may be slightly swollen and feel sensitive or

painful to the touch.

Relief Buy a comfortable and supportive bra (without underwire is best).

Headaches:

The sudden surge of hormones may cause migraines.

Relief Try hot and cold compresses, temple massage, and fresh air. Acetaminophen is considered safe for pregnant women, but talk to your doctor before taking any drugs.

Nasal Congestion:

High levels of estrogen and progesterone increase blood flow to the mucous membranes, causing them to soften and swell. Your sinuses may feel extremely dry.

Relief Use a humidifier to loosen congestion, and lubricate the inside of your nose with a little petroleum jelly.

in the mood for love -- or not

Early in pregnancy, levels of estrogen and progesterone soar -- increasing blood flow and sensitivity in the breasts, vagina, labia, and clitoris -- which may turn you into a sexual dynamo. On the other hand, when you're dealing with nausea, fatigue, and moodiness, you may find sex as appealing as your annual exam. The key for you and your partner is to expect fluctuations in desire, so that when it wanes, you can stay intimate in other ways -- by holding hands, snuggling, or giving each other massages.

By the way, there's no reason to fear that you'll harm the baby during intercourse. She's well-protected in her amniotic bubble, and unless you're at risk for miscarriage or preterm labor (in which case, you should seek your doctor's advice), sex generally poses no danger whatsoever.

the emotional roller coaster

Consider yourself hormonally challenged: During pregnancy, estrogen can climb to 60 times its normal level. In general, higher levels of both progesterone and estrogen can make you feel good, but sometimes the huge fluctuations can also puncture the euphoria. In fact, a wide range of emotional states is perfectly normal -- quiet and withdrawn, scared, anxious, elated and excited, easily angered or tearful, ambivalent, worried, and happy. But you can try to stay on an even keel with enough rest, exercise, and communication with your partner.

On the other hand, if your symptoms include prolonged weepiness, anxiety, sleeplessness, guilt, anger, pessimism, or detachment, talk to a professional about pregnancy-related depression. This potentially serious condition can last anywhere from weeks to months, and it can be treated safely with therapy and medicine. Women who experience severe depression during pregnancy are also at high risk of postpartum depression, so this is one condition you don't want to wait out.

when woes are serious

With everything your body's going through during pregnancy, it can be tough to tell which changes are simply uncomfortable and which are dangerous. Don't hesitate to call your doctor when in doubt. And be sure to talk to her if you experience any of the following symptoms:

Extreme Fatigue:

A possible sign of anemia, or iron deficiency in the blood.

Persistent Vomiting or Diarrhea or a High Fever Lasting More Than 24 Hours:

Any of these conditions can cause dehydration, which in turn can damage the baby's developing organs.

Bleeding:

A possible sign of a miscarriage or of placenta previa.

Constant Abdominal Pain or Cramping:

Symptoms that may indicate an ectopic pregnancy or pending miscarriage.

Severe Headaches or Sudden, Excessive Swelling of the Hands and Face:

Possible signs of pregnancy-induced hypertension, and preeclampsia.

treat yourself

This is one time when everyone will let you enjoy a much-deserved break. Take advantage!

- Light some candles and soak in the tub.
- Get your hair washed at a salon.
- Make a "baby tape" of your favorite music.
- Rent a tear-jerker and cry your eyes out.
- Buy yourself flowers.
- Get a pedicure even if you can't see your feet anymore.

The BT Guide was written by Karen Miles.