



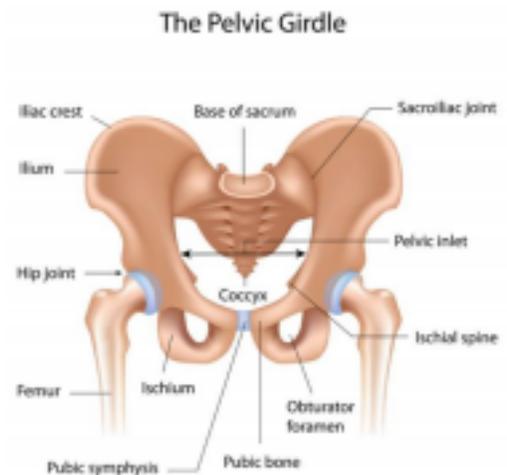
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Pregnancy and the Pubic Symphysis

What is the Pubic Symphysis?

Our pelvis is a ring of bone and cartilage. The low back and tailbone make up the back of the ring, while the flat bones at the bottom of our belly, called the **pubic bones**, make up the front of the ring. You can feel the pubic bones if you place your fingers about 5 inches below your belly button.

Straight down from our belly button, in the very center of the left and right pubic bones, is a flexible disc of cartilage. The flexibility of this disc helps the pelvis widen in preparation for labor. Closer to birth, the disc will sometimes widen an extra centimeter, or about the width of your pinky finger. The joint made up the pubic bones and the disc is called the **pubic symphysis**.



Many pregnant women notice that the pubic symphysis becomes sensitive or painful as the progress throughout the weeks into the second or even third trimester. When the pubic symphysis joint is irritated and becomes painful, it is given the label **symphysis pubis dysfunction (SPD)**. Symphysis pubis dysfunction is not dangerous to the mother or fetus, however, it can make moving around difficult, especially activities where they may be on one leg for a moment (stairs, getting into and out of car, side sleeping from pressure on one hip).

What does symphysis pubis dysfunction (SPD) feel like?

Like other types of joint pain, discomfort at the pubic symphysis can occur on a scale. On the less severe end of the scale, SPD can feel like a slight pinch or ache. In more rare cases, SPD can feel so overpowering that someone will not want to walk. Sometimes the pain occurs more on one side of the body than the other, or it will occur in the groin or inner thighs.

Pubic symphysis joint pain is often provoked by moving the legs apart, such as getting in and out of a car, climbing out of bed, rolling in bed, or going up and down stairs. Standing up from prolonged sitting, particularly on a soft couch, is another movement known to trigger pain. Occasionally, the pubic symphysis joint gets so irritated that it can seem like every movement hurt, and it can be hard to pin down which movement is the trigger of the pain.

What are some reasons I should talk to my provider about my pain? As a



healthcare provide, it is beneficial to check in with your mother/client/patient at appointments and as questions of pain or discomfort in several regions especially pubic area. Some people feel that pain is an expected part of pregnancy or they are complaining if they bring it up.

Can symphysis pubis dysfunction be prevented?

Exercise has been shown to prevent, as well as decrease the intensity, of SPD during pregnancy. The most effective exercises for preventing SPD are the ones where our body weight is going through our legs. Examples for pregnancy include walking, standing barre moves, and light jogging.

Not used to exercising? Unless you have been put on bed rest or told not to exercise during pregnancy, walking is a good starting point. Typically walking for 15 minutes two times per day during pregnancy is an achievable goal. Are you already exercising and your healthcare team has given you the green light to continue? Keep at it!

Looking for more information exercise during pregnancy? Here are some resources:

1. American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists:
<https://www.acog.org/patient-resources/faqs/pregnancy/exercise-during-pregnancy>
2. American Pregnancy Association: <https://americanpregnancy.org/health-fitness/exercise-during-pregnancy-5451>

Looking for an exercise class for pregnancy? Dr. Ashley Wozniak, PT, DPT with Inspired Maternity in Peoria, offers in person and virtual prenatal exercises safe for pregnancy and delivery. She also offers Wellness sessions that take a proactive approach to our change bodies during pregnancy and helps educate on postural changes, strengthening and flexibility routines that are individualized to your changing body and growing baby. She will help prepare you physically for your labor and birth of your baby.

What if I already have pubic symphysis pain?

Fear not! You can often improve how you feel before delivery. However, don't just hope that this issue will go away on its own. Expect to put in work to make your body feel better.



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1. **Change your type of activity or back off activity temporarily—but don't quit altogether!** Suppose your pain started after a long hike or shopping trip. Consider changing your activity to being in a pool. This way you get the health benefits of exercise while taking some of the pressure off the joints. If you decide to back off an activity, you might think about doing smaller but more frequent bouts, such as two 1-mile jogs instead of running two miles straight.
2. **Consider making an appointment with someone who understands pubic symphysis pain.** This is often a pelvic health physical therapist or a chiropractor who specializes in pregnancy. Treatment may include: hands-on techniques, application of kinesiotape, exercise training, stretching, and body mechanics instruction. Before booking an appointment, contact the provider's office first to make sure they have experience treating symphysis pubis dysfunction.

Self-help tips for with pubic symphysis pain during pregnancy and postpartum

Warning – this is a long list. It can take a bit of trial and error to figure out what strategies help your mother out the most.

Note: If they had SPD during a past pregnancy, they might want to start practicing these tips before pain starts.

1. **Walking.** Little quick steps beat big steps. Try seeing if you can shorten your stride and make your footsteps as quite as possible. This will reduce the pressure going through the pelvis. If you have to carry something when you walk, consider putting it in a backpack or holding it close to your chest with both arms. Often times carrying something on just one side of the body (like a bunch of grocery bags) will bother the pubic symphysis.
2. **Sleep.** Sleep with a pillow between your knees. It is best if the pillow reaches all the way down between your ankles. This helps keep weight evenly distributed through the pelvis, reducing pain. A pillow under your pregnant belly may also help take strain off the pelvis.
3. **Rolling over in bed.** To go from one side to the other, (1) bend your knees to 90 degrees, (2) tense your belly gently for stability (sometimes doing a Kegel helps too!), and (3) roll with your knees, hips, and shoulders in line like a log. Avoid flopping side to side in bed or letting your spine twist.
4. **Dressing.** Sit down on the edge of your bed or on a chair to get dressed. Standing on one leg can irritate the pubic symphysis.



5. **Stairs.** Step with one foot, then have the following foot meet it on the same step. This means that you will take the stairs twice as slow as normal, but with a smaller movement through the pelvis. Another strategy is to face the railing and try going up stairs stepping to the side.
6. **Car.** When getting in a car, turn your back to the seat and aim your bottom in. Once seated, keep the knees close together as you slowly turn to face forward. Getting out is the same process in reverse. Keeping the knees close together helps prevent the pubic symphysis from feeling pulled on.
7. **Sitting.** Rest as evenly as possible on your sit bones. Consider putting a pillow behind your back for support. Avoid slumping or leaning on one sit bone more than the other. These movements pull on the pubic symphysis joint and cause irritation. Many people find relief by sitting on a large exercise ball (about 65 cm). Avoid sitting cross legged on the floor—this is one of the most bothersome positions for the pubic symphysis.
8. **Intimate activities.** Aim to keep the knees together as much as possible. This may require some creativity for positioning (think spooning or using a chair).

Should I wear a support belt?

Most, but not all, people with SPD feel less pain and have an easier time walking with a support belt on. A belt works by holding the pelvis steadier, resulting in less movement across an inflamed pubic symphysis and less strain to the pelvic floor muscles. The most common belt for SPD treatment is the Serola Sacroiliac Belt. Sizing guidelines and video directions for use can be found online. Another common belt is the Upsie Belly. Many support belts can be purchased using a Health Savings Account (HSA) or Flexible Health Savings (FSA).

Some people use the belt just when they need more support, such as for a walk around the neighborhood. Other people wear the belt 23 hours per day, just taking it off to shower. It is typically best to start with an hour of belt use to see if it is helpful. If it is helpful, then wearing time can be increased by a few hours per day. Sometimes people find that they need help from a physical therapist or chiropractor to adjust the pubic bones before splinting them together with a brace.

What are some strategies to help with SPD during labor and delivery?

1. **Practice birthing positions ahead of time.** Most birthing people with pubic symphysis pain find that they prefer hands and knees (quadruped) positions. Sidelying can be comfortable if the knees are not spaced too far apart (generally



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not wider than shoulders apart). Frequently, deep squatting is the most aggravating position. Picking 3 or more comfortable positions prior to birth can develop confidence for labor.

- 2. Take weight off the pelvis during birth.** Getting in the tub can give the pelvis a much-needed break from pressure. Similarly, resting the upper body on a birth ball can help take some of the weight off.
- 3. Tie a scarf around the knees during later labor.** During labor in bed, you can make a loop around your knees. Allow for about one and a half feet of knee separation. This loop can keep the knees from accidentally being pushed too far apart in labor and straining the pubic symphysis. The scarf technique is especially helpful if you have an epidural, and might they not be aware of increased stress on the pubic symphysis in various positions. The scarf can also serve as a visual reminder to others at the birth to avoid widening the knees unnecessarily.
- 4. Talk to your birth support people about positioning.** Oftentimes, the pubic symphysis is injured when an eager birth companion lifts the birthing person's knee towards the shoulder. This usually occurs during pushing in sidelying when the top leg is being held. By gently guiding a birth companion to keep the top leg more at belly button level than up to the shoulder, considerable pubic symphysis pain after birth can usually be mitigated. (However, there may be urgent situations where a knee to shoulder position is warranted.)
- 5. Practice good body mechanics immediately after birth.** Keeping knees close together can reduce pain in the pubic symphysis. The most important movements to keep in mind are: rolling in bed, getting out of bed, and getting in/out of a car. One simple way for people to remember to keep their legs together is to imagine that they have a mermaid tail.

What should I expect after birth?

Right after birth, the pubic symphysis pain may suddenly go away or it may feel worse from the physical rigors of labor. If your pain goes away, congratulations! You can resume progressively returning to your usual activities under the guidance of your medical team.

If your pain got worse or stayed the same, fear not. The first three days postpartum may be very challenging. You may find that you need a walker or wheelchair to temporarily



take the pain away. This does not mean you are permanently disabled, just that you benefit from some temporary support. Don't think of a walker as a crutch or sign of weakness—think of it as a short-term rest break for your pelvis.

Longer term recovery: after the first couple weeks, you will likely be able to walk for 5 to 10 minutes at a time for gentle exercise. A stationary cycle feels good to some people, and you may build up your time gradually from 5 minutes. People who enjoy running find that they can often resume jogging a few miles around 3 to 4 months postpartum. If you have particular exercise goals in mind, it is a good idea to work with a pelvic health physical therapist.

What if my pubic symphysis ruptures?

Many people feel that their pubic symphysis will burst open during later pregnancy. While I assure people that this is exceedingly rare, I do acknowledge that it may happen during delivery. While a rupture may seem catastrophic, these ruptures often heal surprising well without the need for surgery. I sometimes see people back to jogging 3 months afterwards. A rupture does not mean that the pelvis is broken for forever.

What about a future pregnancy?

Severe pubic symphysis pain rightly makes people concerned for the future pregnancy. Commonly, joint pain that happens in one pregnancy is worse during a second pregnancy—unless it is properly addressed. I suggest that people become as fit as possible prior to pregnancy and maintain a healthy level of fitness during pregnancy. Again, weight bearing exercise has been shown to reduce the risk of SPD. Early use of interventions to manage pain, such as a support belt or targeted exercise, can lead to a more satisfying pregnancy experience overall. On occasion, a person who experienced a traumatic pubic symphysis injury during birth will choose an elective Cesarean for a subsequent birth. A Cesarean is not required in these cases, but it can help the birthing person to feel more in control and to avoid a triggering experience.

Questions has a healthcare provider that you can continuously ask your mother/client/patient during appointments.

Asking these questions at your initial appointment and subsequent appoints (as well as directing them to let you know if and when they do start experiencing any pain or discomfort. This can help us catch issues early and direct our mother's to PT or another professional that can provide early treatment, education and recommendations to preventing worsening and even resolve the pain early on).

- Are you experiencing any lower back pain (center or off to one side)?



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- Are you experiencing any pain, discomfort, numbness or tingling or radiating pain into one of your legs? If so, how far down does it go?
- Are you experiencing pain or discomfort in the front lower pubic region?
- Are you experiencing pain or discomfort in one or both groin regions or inner thighs?
- Are you experiencing any pain, discomfort or tightness in your abdomen or rib areas?
- Are you experiencing any numbness or pain in the pelvic floor region?