

OPTIMAL HEALTH UNIVERSITY™

Presented by Steven L. Smith, DC

Spine-Friendly Tips for New Moms

Motherhood is a joy, but it's also hard work. Between diapers and 3:00 a.m. feedings, it's easy for new moms to neglect their own well-being. However, in order to give her best to baby, mom must be at her best, and this includes maintaining a healthy spine. Physiological changes caused by pregnancy combined with the physical demands of childcare leave 16 percent of postpartum women with persistent lower back pain (Spine 2008;20:E386-93).

And, even moms who are lucky enough to remain pain-free often develop a spinal condition known as vertebral subluxation. This occurs when spinal bones (vertebrae) become restricted or slightly misaligned. Vertebral subluxations may not initially cause pain, but if left unchecked may interfere with nervous system activity, in turn leading to a plethora of health problems ranging from back pain and headache to digestive problems and fatigue. Chiropractors, like Dr. Smith, focus on correcting vertebral subluxations with gentle and effective maneuvers called chiropractic adjustments.



But being a mom doesn't have to lead to spine-related health problems. Regular chiropractic care, along with following simple spine-friendly guidelines ward off vertebral subluxations. In honor of Mother's Day, Dr. Smith outlines these guidelines for new moms.

Pregnancy's Toll on the Spine

Back pain is a common complaint during pregnancy — especially during the third trimester — due to several factors that continue to impact a woman postpartum. The growing baby and uterus change the mother's center of gravity, taxing the spine and pelvis (*Obstet Gynecol Surv* 2008;63:103-11). Abdominal muscles also stretch and lose tone, so they are less able to help the spine maintain a neutral posture (*Medsc Wom Health* 1997;2:2).

As with many pregnancy woes, hormones also play a role in the development of vertebral subluxations. A pregnant woman's body releases ten times the normal amount of the hormone relaxin during the first trimester. Relaxin loosens joints and ligaments

in the pelvis to make room for the growing uterus, and to allow for delivery.

Unfortunately, relaxin also loosens ligaments in the spine. The extra weight of the uterus compresses these loose ligaments, often producing vertebral subluxations and related low-back pain. Some researchers believe that these ligaments stay loose and prone to overstretching for up to eight months following giving birth (*J Women's Health* 2009;18:663-5).

Bounce Back Postpartum With Chiropractic Care

Just as pregnancy brings many changes to a woman's body, so does the postpartum period. Swollen tissues shrink, and bones and joints shift again back toward their pre-pregnancy positions. Aches and pains — especially in the low back — can accompany these changes and may be compounded in the case of a difficult labor. Some researchers speculate that epidural use during labor may incite back pain.

Why not turn to pain medications to alleviate postpartum back pain? Studies find that they are minimally effective and cause a variety of side effects (*Expert Opin Pharmacother* 2004; 5:2091-8). They may also be unsafe for use by breastfeeding mothers, because the drugs may contaminate breast milk.

Chiropractic is a safe and proven form of therapy for back pain and other musculoskeletal complaints both during and after pregnancy (*J Chiropr Med* 2007;6:70-4; *J Midwifery Women's Health* 2006;51:e7-10). If you received chiropractic care during pregnancy, continue to do so for your best spinal health as your body recovers from childbirth. If you are a new mom and not already receiving chiropractic care, call Dr. Smith today to schedule an evaluation.

Lift Baby Safely

An average newborn weighs 7.5 pounds (3.4 kilograms) and gets picked up about 50 times each day.

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Babies double their weight in the first year, more than making up for less frequent lifting as they become increasingly independently mobile. All of this makes a proper lifting technique a vital skill for mothers — as well as fathers and other caregivers.

The old wisdom to “lift with your knees, not with your back” has persisted because it’s true. The spine best functions in what is called neutral position. Bending at the waist with straight knees (without lifting anything) puts 150 percent of your body weight on the lower back. Picking up a baby or other load from this already precarious pose often causes the back to round — a position that places enormous stress on the spine. Muscle strain or spasm, overextended ligaments and stress on the bone may ensue.

To lift your child safely, keep the back in the neutral position and squat or kneel on one knee. Allow the pelvis to rotate as needed, but take care not to round your back. Grasp baby on both sides of his or her torso so that both arms will take equal weight. Hold the child centered in front of your body and close to your center of gravity — near your belly button.

Use your leg muscles to complete the lift, and keep the abdominal muscles tight to support your back. Avoid twisting your spine — this is a common cause of back injury when moving a baby or child in or out of a car seat (*Contemporary Ergonomics* 2002). Protect your back by kneeling on the seat next to the car seat while assisting your child.

Choose an Ergonomic Baby Carrier

There is a dizzying array of options for moms who want to “wear” their babies in a carrier. “Babywearing” has a range of proven benefits on infant well-being and development, as well as maternal response and secure attachment.

Backpack-style or front carriers should have wide straps to distribute the child’s weight evenly and com-

fortably across the wearer’s shoulders and waist. Some research shows that carrying weight (such as a baby) on the front of the body is preferable for maintaining proper posture (*Ergonomics* 2006;49:885-94).

Side carriers can harm the back as the free shoulder counterbalances the weighted shoulder, curving the spine. If you must use a side carrier, alternate sides frequently to minimize risk of back and neck injury.

Watch Your Breastfeeding Position

Breastfeeding is another childcare activity in which attention to body mechanics can prevent vertebral subluxations. Sit up with the spine in neutral position, using cushions as needed to support your back. Be sure to bring the baby to your breast rather than leaning over the baby — this rounds and strains the spine.



Use pillows in your lap to support your arms and baby. Many specialty pillows are available specifically for this purpose. Support your lower back by placing your feet flat on a stool or foot rest. You may also find it comfortable to nurse lying on your side, using pillows to support the back and knees.

It is not unusual to need assistance establishing a breastfeeding routine; a lactation consultant or La Leche League leader can troubleshoot your positioning if you find that breastfeeding hurts your back. Ask the doctor for a referral if you need help.

Exercise for a Strong Back

Exercise is a critical component of any spinal care plan. New moms vary in both how quickly they can resume physical activity and at what intensity. However, light exercise should be resumed as soon as your midwife or obstetrician suggests, and gradually stepped up to pre-pregnancy levels (*Br J Sports Med* 2003;37:6-12).

Rebuilding flexibility and muscle tone will help your body handle the new demands of caring for baby. Developing strength in abdominal and back muscles reduces postpartum back pain (*Physiother Res Int* 2008;13:18-30). And, toning your arms can stave off soreness caused by constantly picking up your child. What’s more, routine exercise may prevent postpartum depression (*Phys Ther* 2010;90:348-55).

Mind Your Posture

Finally, the doctor encourages new moms to remain conscious of their posture. The spine-compressing “sway back” posture of the last months of pregnancy can be a difficult habit to kick after delivery. Whether sitting, standing, or walking, imagine being suspended by a string from the top of your head. This lengthens the spine and engages abdominal and pelvic floor muscles to support the back. Using these stabilizing muscles to maintain good posture reduces back pain (*Spine* 2006;31:E707-12).

Also, at your next chiropractic appointment ask the doctor to check your posture and instruct you if any changes are necessary. And, if you don’t have one scheduled, make sure to call us today!

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