

**Pregnancy and post-partum** are times in a woman's life that bring about many feelings; excitement, anticipation, joy, nervousness, and sometimes discomfort. A number of changes happen to your body during and after pregnancy. It can take several weeks or months to get back to the condition you were in before you became pregnant, and there are some things that will just never be the same!

**Physical therapists** are experts in treating the musculoskeletal system (the muscles, joints and the surrounding soft tissues of the body). Physical therapists that are specially trained in women's health can safely and effectively help women overcome issues that arise during the childbearing year so that women can focus on these amazing life experiences without pain or further undue stress.

Physical therapists utilize their specialized medical training to thoroughly evaluate each patient and design treatment programs that address her individual needs. It is the goal of the therapist to empower the patient and make her a partner in her care. Physical therapy is proven to be successful in the care of pregnant and post-partum patients. The carry-over of healthy habits, exercises and skills the patient acquires through physical therapy treatment help her transition through the childbearing year and prepare her for the constant physical demands of raising a young child.

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For more information about how Physical Therapists can help with women's health conditions please contact the Section on Women's Health of the American Physical Therapy Association at:

Website: [www.womenshealthapta.org](http://www.womenshealthapta.org)  
Telephone: (800) 999-APTA extension 3229

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# PHYSICAL THERAPY DURING PREGNANCY AND THE POST-PARTUM PERIOD



## PHYSICAL CHANGES IN THE CHILDBEARING YEAR AND THEIR POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES:

- Blood volume increases - swelling
- Hormone level changes - ligament laxity leading to low back or pelvic girdle pain, changes in digestive motility, headaches
- Changes in rib cage dimensions - pressure on nerves and tissues above and between ribs, difficulty deep breathing, abdominals stretched, generalized trunk discomfort, mid/upper back pain
- Weight gain - extra stress on feet, legs and back, forward weight of baby changes spinal curves, weak and overstretched abdominals
- Breast changes - larger breasts may alter posture
- Vaginal delivery - injury to pelvic floor (pain, incontinence, urgency, prolapse, coccyx pain)
- Cesarean delivery - scarring and pain, weak abdominals

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The good news is that a Physical Therapist, trained in working with pregnant and post-partum women, can help with a number of these things!

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## A REFERRAL TO A PHYSICAL THERAPIST WOULD BE APPROPRIATE FOR WOMEN WITH:

- Low back pain
- Pelvic pain
- Tendonitis
- Shoulder/arm pain and tingling
- Upper back and neck pain
- Headaches
- Incontinence (involuntary leakage of urine)
- Urgency of urination
- Pain associated with scars (episiotomy or Cesarean section)
- Leg/foot pain, weakness, and/or swelling
- Carpal tunnel syndrome
- Thoracic outlet syndrome
- Hip pain
- Pain with intercourse
- Musculoskeletal issues related to bed rest
- Diastasis recti (separation of the abdominal muscles)
- Prolapse (lack of support in the pelvic area that allows the organs, like the uterus, to fall from their normal position)
- Coccydynia (tailbone pain)

Physical therapists can also assist women who are not experiencing pain or discomfort in pregnancy and post-partum. These services may include:

- Prenatal and post-partum exercise prescription or classes
- Posture and body mechanics screening and instruction
- Pelvic floor exercise education
- Education and instruction regarding various positions and techniques for labor and delivery
- Women with any pre-existing pelvic pain or dysfunction would benefit from labor recommendations to prevent recurrence or exacerbation of the injury.

## HOW CAN PHYSICAL THERAPY HELP?



- **Joint and soft tissue mobilization** techniques to reduce muscle guarding, scarring, joint dysfunction, and optimize musculoskeletal alignment.
- **Exercise** to re-educate and strengthen muscles that are not properly supporting the body's alignment and performing the demands placed on the body.
- **Education** regarding home techniques for symptom management, proper positioning and postures, proper and more efficient performance of activities of daily living to reduce stresses on the body and conserve energy, and relaxation techniques.
- **Bracing/ Supports** to add external support to the body to allow tissues to heal and strengthen and to reduce stresses on the body.
- **Biofeedback** to re-educate muscles to reduce pain and guarding and to reduce or eliminate incontinence.
- **Modalities** (mostly used post-partum) with the goals of reducing pain, inflammation, muscle guarding and increasing soft tissue and/or joint immobility.