

Pregnancy and Associated Foot Pain

I have walked through the first 6 months of my first pregnancy with minimal ease and discomfort. However, after this last weekend's activities, my bliss is coming to an end, and my feet hurt. Pregnancy causes a tremendous amount of change to the body that can produce significant lower extremity swelling, discomfort, and pain while ambulating. For the active mother or career person, sitting down and taking break to elevate your legs may not always be an option. Many of the causes of foot and leg discomfort during pregnancy can be reduced and minimized with the proper support.

Swelling in the lower extremities during pregnancy can be significant. The pregnancy will require increase fluid for blood volume and support of the baby's amniotic environment. As the baby gets larger, it will interfere with the bloods return to the heart causing lower extremity swelling. This extra fluid is found in the tissues and veins. Veins transport deoxygenated blood back to the heart and are structurally different from arteries that pump blood to the extremities. Veins are primarily elastic in nature and do not have muscular components as do arteries. These vessels transfer the deoxygenated blood through a valve system with each muscular contraction. With decreased activity, increased fluid volume and the baby sitting on the large veins in your belly reducing flow, the elastic veins enlarge and the valve system is compromised resulting in increase fluid collection, fatigue, varicose veins, and increased risk for deep vein thrombosis.

There are a variety of ways you can reduced the amount of swelling in your legs. Periodic walks contract the leg muscles resulting in increased venous circulation and elevating your legs periodically allows fluid to shift to your central core via gravity. If you are an active or up on your feet most of the day, I strongly recommend compression hose. Compression hose is not the same as control type pantyhose. They are more durable and designed to maintain a specific pressure that doesn't become more elastic with use, as do pantyhose. They come in knee high's, thigh, and pantyhose styles and there are now also designer materials available that come in variety of colors for the career woman. Compression hose should be put on first thing in the morning before gravity takes hold and swelling occurs. There is a specific way to put compression hose easily. You can not put compression hose on like normal socks or nylons. You need to turn the compression hose inside out with the exception of the forefoot of the compression hose. Slide it over your foot to the heel, and then slide the rest of the compression hose up your leg. If you would like a demonstration, feel free to come by our office.

Ingrown toenails can also be caused by swelling of the lower extremities. These can be treated while pregnant with an avulsion of the offending nail. A small amount of local anesthetic is used to numb the toe and aid in removal of the nail which is safe during pregnancy and alleviates this painful condition immediately. If this is a chronic condition, a permanent (chemical) procedure will not be performed until after childbirth.

Heel pain, foot fatigue, with muscular soreness and tendonitis can also occur. A chemical called relaxin is produced to increase the flexibility of the joints to allow for the baby's growth and extrusion through pubic bones during birth. This chemical also increases the flexibility of the joints in the foot increasing strain on the plantar fascia (a ligament across the bottom of the foot). When you combine increased weight gain and fluid retention with joint laxity, your ligaments and tendons will get sore and fatigued resulting in pain while ambulating. To support these joints and tendons, wear good tennis shoes that lace up with an arch support. As your belly gets larger, you may have to recruit assistance with getting your shoes on. Be sure the shoes fitted properly, as your feet may get larger during pregnancy and are large enough in the front to accommodate the end of the day swelling. Slip on shoes, clogs, and slippers, although easy to slide on, provide no support. High-heeled shoes should be avoided after your second trimester. Your center of gravity is changing and heeled shoes can cause back discomfort and can reduce your ability to balance increasing your risks for falls. If you have to have a sandal type shoe, stick with a Birkenstock style that has a significant arch for support. Custom orthotics, if obtained early in pregnancy, is the best way of controlling the biomechanics of your foot to relieve pain and can be switched from shoe to shoe.

