

What musculoskeletal issues are associated with the prenatal and postpartum periods?

The prenatal period is a time of great change for a woman, physically, emotionally, and hormonally. As the fetus grows, the overall musculoskeletal system is challenged by altered posture, shortened muscles, potential muscle imbalances, and changes in spinal mobility. These changes may cause pain and dysfunction. In the postpartum phase, fluctuating hormone levels combined with additional physical changes as a result of delivery may also result in musculoskeletal problems such as excessive joint mobility, weakness of the core stabilizers, and altered spinal mobility and function.

What causes dysfunction in the prenatal and postpartum periods?

Fluctuating hormone levels in both the prenatal and postpartum phases may cause excessive joint mobility which can cause pain and dysfunction. Because of the postural changes associated with pregnancy, some muscles become tight to support the changing posture, while others are stretched and become weak. This results in muscle imbalance and a potential for decreased stabilization. Mobility of the spine can be affected in both the prenatal and the postpartum periods as the spine adjusts to the changing posture as the fetus grows.

What are symptoms of musculoskeletal dysfunction during the prenatal and postpartum periods?

Symptoms of dysfunction may include pain in the joints of the pelvis or spine, muscular pain in the hips and L/E's, or numbness into the extremities. Weakness may be present in the abdominals, resulting in pain with transitional movements or lifting. Weakness may also be manifested as urinary incontinence in the postpartum period. Muscle imbalance may also cause pain or contribute to urinary issues in the postpartum phase.

How can physical therapy help?

Physical therapists are skilled in evaluating and providing patient centered treatment of musculoskeletal problems. Physical therapists trained in the area of women's health have further knowledge about issues directly related to women as they move through different stages of life, from childbearing years to the post menopausal period. Physical therapists can provide hands on treatment to address spinal and pelvic joint dysfunction, instruct in exercises to address muscle weakness and imbalance, and provide guidance and instruction related to modifications of activities of daily living that may be difficult during the prenatal and postpartum phases.

Who Should be Referred to a Women's Health Physical Therapist?

Those with:

Back, sacral, hip, pelvic, rib pain

Pain in the neck or upper back

Headaches

Sciatica, carpal tunnel, thoracic outlet or other nerve symptoms

Decreased ability to do normal daily activities

Weak or tight muscles

Pelvic pain with sexual intercourse, use of tampons or gynecologic exam

Desire to start or continue an exercise program

Urinary incontinence