

Pregnancy - signs and symptoms

If you're a woman and you have sex with a man without using any contraception, you could become pregnant. Each time you have sex, you have up to a 10 per cent chance of becoming pregnant.

Signs that you may be pregnant include missing a period, breast changes, fatigue, frequent urination and nausea (morning sickness). However, these symptoms may be caused by other factors and do not prove that you are pregnant. A urine test or blood test can confirm a suspected pregnancy.

Pregnancy myths

There are many myths about when and where you can become pregnant. You can't believe everything you hear. In actual fact, you can become pregnant:

- Even if it's your first time
- At any time of the month, including during your period
- Even if your partner withdraws his penis before he comes (a small amount of sperm is released before coming)
- Even if you've never had a period
- No matter what position you're in when you have sex
- Even if you douche immediately after sex
- Even if you don't have an orgasm.

Early symptoms of pregnancy

Missing a period is the best known symptom of early pregnancy, but it doesn't happen to everyone. The enormous hormonal changes taking place during pregnancy trigger a variety of symptoms. Some women experience all the symptoms of early pregnancy, while others may have only a few or none at all. Many of these symptoms, such as a missed period (amenorrhoea), nausea (morning sickness) or tiredness, can also be caused by stress or illness.

Symptoms

The symptoms of early pregnancy can include:

- Missed period (amenorrhoea)
- Nausea and vomiting (often called 'morning' sickness, but it can occur at any time)
- Breast tenderness and enlargement
- Fatigue
- Passing urine more frequently than usual, particularly at night
- Mood changes (for example, unexplained teariness)
- Cravings for food you may otherwise not like
- A distaste for foods you usually like.

Missed period

Missing a period (amenorrhoea) is often the first sign of possible pregnancy. However, some women experience light bleeding around the time of their expected period. This is usually an 'implantation bleed', which occurs when the embryo first attaches itself to the lining of the uterus (womb).

Apart from pregnancy, missed periods can also be caused by other factors, including:

- Excessive exercise
- Low body weight
- Stress
- Hormonal imbalances
- Breastfeeding.

Nausea and vomiting

Around five to seven out of 10 pregnant women experience some degree of morning sickness, especially in the first few months. The symptoms include nausea and vomiting and loss of appetite. Most women don't just get symptoms in the morning, but experience them throughout the whole day. Morning sickness usually begins around the fourth week of pregnancy and subsides by week 12.

Apart from pregnancy, nausea and vomiting can be caused by other factors, including:

- Food poisoning
- Gastrointestinal disorders
- Some types of infection.

Breast changes

During pregnancy the breasts become fuller, swollen and tender. These changes are similar to those you may have noticed in the few days before your period. During pregnancy, the skin around the nipple becomes darker and the veins in the breast become more obvious.

Apart from pregnancy, breast changes can be caused by other factors, including:

- The effects of hormones in the lead-up to your period
- Oral contraceptive pills
- Hormonal imbalances.

Fatigue

Overwhelming tiredness is common in early pregnancy. This is most likely caused by the massive increase in the sex hormone progesterone. Progesterone is needed to maintain the pregnancy and help the baby to grow, but it also slows your metabolism. Energy levels usually rise again by around the fourth month of pregnancy when the placenta is well established.

Apart from pregnancy, fatigue can be caused by other factors including:

- Stress
- Hectic lifestyle
- Insufficient sleep and rest
- Poor diet
- Anaemia
- Chronic illness
- Lack of exercise
- Sudden elimination of caffeine (such as tea, coffee).

Frequent urination

Pregnancy causes an increase in levels of body fluids and greater kidney efficiency. The swelling uterus also presses against the bladder. As a result, most women start experiencing more frequent urination within the first few weeks of becoming pregnant.

Apart from pregnancy, frequent urination can be caused by other factors including:

- Urinary tract infections

- Diabetes
- Diuretic medications.

Mood changes

Some newly pregnant women experience mood changes that are similar to those typically felt in the days leading up to menstruation, such as irritability. Other pregnant women experience feelings of elation. It is thought that the pregnancy hormones influence chemicals in the brain, causing mood changes.

Apart from pregnancy, mood changes can be caused by other factors, including:

- Impending menstruation
- Stress
- Life events.

Food cravings

Cravings for certain foods are very common in pregnancy, especially for foods that provide energy and calcium, such as milk and other dairy products. You may also notice a sudden distaste for foods you previously liked. Some women even develop a bizarre taste for non-food items such as soil or paper. This is called 'pica'.

Both food cravings and aversions are thought to have a protective benefit for the baby. Most nutritionists recommend that cravings be accommodated, as long as they don't dominate and replace more important foods.

Apart from pregnancy, food cravings can be caused by other factors, including:

- Poor diet
- Stress
- Hormonal changes in the lead-up to menstruation
- Some chronic illnesses.

Testing for pregnancy

Pregnancy home test kits are available from pharmacies. If you follow the instructions carefully, they provide reliable and accurate results. Home test kits typically contain special paper that is sensitive to the presence of the pregnancy hormone human chorionic gonadotropin (hCG) in your urine. This hormone is made by the placenta and developing embryo.

Most test kits are best used around one to two weeks after your period was due. If the test is done too soon, the levels of hCG may not yet be high enough to detect, resulting in a negative response even if you are pregnant. You may also get a negative response when pregnant if you have had a lot to drink, as your urine may be dilute.

If you have a positive home test result or have a negative home test result but still feel you may be pregnant, see your doctor or family planning clinic for confirmation. Blood tests can be taken by your doctor to detect your hCG levels and can be accurate within one week or so of becoming pregnant. At around 10 to 12 weeks, your doctor can also perform an ultrasound scan to test for pregnancy.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your pharmacist
- Family planning clinic
- Family Planning Victoria Tel. 1800 013 952 or (03) 9257 0100 or The Action Centre (for young people under 25) Tel. 1800 013 952 or (03) 9654 4766

Things to remember

- Common symptoms of early pregnancy include amenorrhoea (missed period), breast changes, fatigue, frequent urination and nausea (morning sickness).
- A suspected pregnancy needs to be confirmed by your doctor or family planning clinic, as most symptoms can be caused by other factors such as stress or illness.
- Your doctor or family planning clinic can also offer guidance about ongoing management.

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