

## Pregnancy - signs and symptoms

The enormous hormonal changes taking place during pregnancy trigger a variety of symptoms. Some women will experience all of the symptoms of early pregnancy, while others may have only a few. Most symptoms – such as amenorrhoea (missed period), morning sickness or fatigue – can also be caused by stress, illness or other events, so a suspected pregnancy needs to be confirmed with urine or blood tests. These tests check for the hormone human chorionic gonadotropin (hCG).

Absolute and irrefutable proof of pregnancy is hearing the baby's heart beat (which can be heard through a special listening device sometime between weeks 10 and 12) or viewing the baby with an ultrasound scan.

If you suspect you may be pregnant, see your doctor or family planning professional for confirmation.

### Symptoms

The symptoms of early pregnancy can include:

- Missed period (amenorrhoea)
- Morning sickness
- Breast changes
- Fatigue
- Frequent urination
- Mood changes
- Food cravings.

### Missed period

The absence of the menstrual period (amenorrhoea) is often the first sign of possible pregnancy. However, some women experience light bleeding around the time of expected menstruation.

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

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

### Morning sickness

Around eight out of 10 pregnant women experience some degree of 'morning sickness', especially in the first few months. The symptoms include nausea and vomiting. Most women don't just get symptoms in the morning, but throughout the whole day. For most women, morning sickness begins around the fourth week of pregnancy and resolves 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. Many women report that the sensations are similar to those experienced in the few days prior to menstruation. Other breast changes related to early pregnancy include a darkening of the skin around the nipple (areola) and more prominent veins across both breasts.

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

- The effects of hormones during the lead-up to menstruation
- Oral contraceptive pills
- Hormonal imbalances.

### **Fatigue**

Many newly pregnant women report feelings of overwhelming tiredness. This is thought to be caused by the massive increase in the sex hormone progesterone. In most cases, energy levels rise by about the fourth month of pregnancy when the placenta is working properly.

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.

### **Frequent urination**

Pregnancy prompts increased levels of body fluids and greater kidney efficiency. The swelling uterus also presses against the bladder. Most women start experiencing more frequent urination within the first few weeks of conception.

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 or weepiness. Other pregnant women experience feelings of elation. It is thought that the pregnancy hormones influence the brain chemicals and cause the mood changes.

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

- Impending menstruation
- Stress
- Life events.

### **Food cravings**

Around eight out of 10 pregnant women experience cravings for at least one particular food. Between 50 and 80 per cent also experience aversions to particular foods they previously enjoyed. According to some theories, a craving indicates a deficiency in the diet. 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.

### **Testing for pregnancy**

There are pregnancy home test kits available from pharmacists that offer reliable and accurate readings if performed strictly to the manufacturer's instructions. Typically, a kit includes special paper that is sensitive to the presence of the pregnancy hormone hCG in your urine. False-negative results can occur if the test is taken before the levels of hCG have built to detectable levels in the urine, or if you have had a lot to drink and the urine is diluted.

Blood tests are also used to detect your hCG levels and can be accurate within one week or so of conception. The ultimate test of pregnancy is hearing the baby's heart beat or seeing the baby via ultrasound scan. Be guided by your doctor or family planning professional.

### **Where to get help**

- Your doctor
- Your local pharmacist
- Family planning clinic
- Family Planning Victoria Tel. (03) 9257 0100

### **Things to remember**

- Common symptoms of early pregnancy include amenorrhoea (missed period), morning sickness and breast changes.
- A suspected pregnancy needs to be confirmed by your doctor, since most symptoms can be caused by other factors such as stress or illness.
- Irrefutable proof of pregnancy includes hearing the baby's heart beat or seeing the baby via ultrasound scan.

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Family Planning Victoria

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