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Pregnancy the Natural Way: Month by Month

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Overview

Many patients ask what to expect during pregnancy and how to maximise their own wellbeing and the health of their unborn child or children. What follows is a month by month guide to the nine-month path from conception to birth, the associated ailments and how these can be managed and treated naturally.

Month 1 (1 to 4 weeks after your last period)

Shortly after implantation, the placenta and umbilical cord begin to form. They provide nourishment and oxygen to the embryo. Until the placenta is fully developed, your baby takes nourishment from the yolk sac. The embryo is enclosed in a sac of fluid, called the amniotic sac, which protects your baby from bumps and pressure. In the first 20 days after your last period the embryo has no heart activity or circulation. By the third week after implantation the baby has a spinal cord, but all the other organs are still to form.

During this time you may experience tiredness and sleepiness, frequent urination, nausea, vomiting, heartburn, indigestion, bloating, food aversions or cravings, and breast changes. These symptoms are entirely normal and vary from woman to woman. You may experience all of them, just a few, or none. Emotionally, you may feel irritable, have mood swings, act irrationally and cry easily, similar to premenstrual syndrome. It is also common to have mixed feelings about being pregnant, including misgivings, fear, joy and elation.

Many women find chamomile tea very helpful in these early weeks, helping to calm and relax the body and aid sleep. Weekly acupuncture to calm the spirit and nourish the blood is also very helpful in smoothing the journey in these early weeks.

From the time you know you are pregnant there are many things to consider, first of all absolutely NO alcohol and NO smoking. The UK Chief Medical Officers advise that the safest approach in pregnancy is not to drink alcohol at all, and a large number of studies show that smoking and alcohol in the first few weeks of pregnancy cause problems with the baby's development.

Consider your lifestyle. I always explain to newly pregnant patients that for the next 12 weeks (until the baby is fully formed) you are a walking incubator, and incubators keep everything as constant for the baby as possible. Ideally, we want everything in your life to stay constant too: some exercise but not too much, not too cold or too hot, enough sleep but not oversleeping. There are many similar measures that we explain to our patients, all of which reduce the chance of miscarriage. Follow the NHS advice on foods to avoid in pregnancy (nhs.uk/pregnancy/keeping-well/foods-to-avoid).

Stay away from anyone who is clearly ill, particularly children with colds or coughs. You can continue your normal level of sexual activity without any risk to your baby, but we recommend using non-lubricated condoms or a diaphragm or cap throughout pregnancy to minimise the chance of bacterial or yeast infections, both of which can cause miscarriage.

There are also some important tests to consider. If you have had more than one miscarriage in the last two years, I recommend regular monitoring of progesterone and beta-hCG levels in the first 10 weeks of pregnancy. These two hormones are essential to the healthy development of an early pregnancy. Progesterone from the corpus luteum maintains the uterine lining and supports implantation; if the level is too low, early miscarriage often follows. Low beta-hCG can indicate a compromised placenta, causing slower development of the baby and in many cases failure of the pregnancy. Both conditions can be treated very

effectively with natural medicines and acupuncture, but early identification and action are needed.

Month 2 (5 to 8 weeks)

By the end of week 6 your baby has a head, body and limb buds. The heart begins to develop in week 5, starts beating between weeks 6 and 7 and is completely formed by the end of week 8. This month is especially critical in your baby's development. Any disturbance from medicines, viruses or environmental factors such as pesticides, chemicals or radiation may cause birth defects. Development is very rapid during the second month, and all your baby's major organs and body systems, including the brain, lungs, liver and stomach, are at an advanced stage by the end of week 8.

Many women do not feel pregnant in these early weeks, which is common. It is also normal to feel very tired, urinate often, feel sick or vomit, have excess saliva, be constipated, have heartburn, indigestion, wind or bloating, experience food aversions or cravings, feel changes and fullness in your breasts, have occasional headaches and feel faint or dizzy at times. Emotions are likely to be fragile, much as in the first month.

The next consideration is where the pregnancy is developing. The risk of ectopic pregnancy (a pregnancy outside the womb) is 1 to 2 in 100 for natural pregnancies and 4 to 6% for assisted pregnancies. An early ultrasound scan between 6 and 7 weeks after your last period can confirm that the baby is alive, how many babies there are and that they are in the correct part of your uterus. This can often be arranged at your local hospital or directly with a private clinic, including ours.

Month 3 (9 to 13 weeks)

Your baby will be completely formed by the end of the third month. Your baby has begun moving its hands, legs and head and opening and closing its mouth, but is still too small for you to feel any movement. The fingers, toes and hands are now formed. Tooth buds have formed under the gums, and the vocal cords develop around week 13. The kidneys are now developed and start draining urine into the bladder. The intestines have formed outside the baby in the umbilical cord, because they cannot yet fit inside. By the end of this month the placenta has fully taken over the production of progesterone.

By the end of month 3 it is helpful to have decided which hospital or midwife you want to register with, as some important checks take place at your 12-week antenatal appointment. Your midwife or doctor will check your weight, blood pressure and urine for sugar and protein, and measure your baby to date the pregnancy accurately and confirm your due date.

Many of the early physical symptoms continue during the third month. Nausea can be treated very effectively with acupuncture, and fresh ginger tea can also help calm your stomach. Emotions may continue to switch between happiness, fear, joy and misgivings, although many women begin to feel a welcome sense of calm around this time.

This is also the right time to consider screening for chromosome abnormalities. This can be done at your hospital or privately with a nuchal scan and free beta-hCG and PAPP-A blood test, which together detect 85 to 90% of pregnancies affected by Down syndrome (trisomy 21), Edwards syndrome (trisomy 18) and Patau syndrome (trisomy 13). A newer blood test, the Harmony test (NIPT), can very accurately detect chromosome abnormalities and the baby's sex from 10 weeks using a sample of the mother's blood. A routine blood test is usually also taken at this time to check for diabetes risk and to establish your blood group and rhesus status.

Month 4 (14 to 17 weeks)

Your baby's eyebrows and eyelashes begin to appear this month, and buds on the side of the head begin to form the outer ears. The head makes up about half of the baby's size. The baby moves, sleeps, wakes, swallows and passes urine, and you may start to feel a slight fluttering in your lower abdomen. By the end of the fourth month your baby will be 20 to 25cm long and weigh about 170g.

This is the month many women start to feel pregnant. You may still be tired, constipated and have indigestion, heartburn, wind or bloating, and occasional headaches and dizziness. Some first-trimester symptoms are likely to ease or disappear, and morning sickness should be decreasing. If not, weekly acupuncture is an effective and safe way to manage it. Week 16 is the earliest a scan can reliably identify your baby's sex, if you wish to know.

New symptoms may include nasal congestion and occasional nosebleeds, blocked ears, bleeding gums, increased appetite, mild swelling of the ankles, feet, hands and face, varicose veins, a slight whitish vaginal discharge, clumsiness and possibly the first movements towards the end of the month. You may have none, some or all of these. Your emotions may still swing between joy, apprehension and irritability. Many women feel frustrated and self-conscious when they no longer fit into their usual clothes but are still too small for maternity clothes.

Month 5 (18 to 22 weeks)

This is a period of rapid growth. Your baby's internal organs are maturing, fingernails have grown to the tips of the fingers and fat is being stored beneath the skin. Your baby is growing muscle and getting stronger every day, sleeps and wakes at regular intervals and is much more active, turning from side to side and head over heels. By the end of the fifth month your baby will be about 25 to 30cm long and weigh about 450g.

You may experience some of the following: movements, increasing whitish discharge, aching in the lower abdomen, constipation, heartburn, indigestion, wind or bloating, occasional headaches, faintness or dizziness, nasal congestion, nosebleeds, blocked ears, bleeding gums, a hearty appetite, leg cramps, swelling, varicose veins, haemorrhoids, a faster heart rate, backache and changes in skin pigmentation on your abdomen and face. Emotions are probably calming down, with fewer mood swings, although you may still feel irritable and forgetful at times. Morning sickness should have disappeared completely.

This month your hospital, midwife or private doctor will arrange an anomaly scan (between 19 and 21 weeks) to check your baby's development and growth thoroughly. This is also the usual time to find out your baby's sex if you and your partner wish to know.

Month 6 (23 to 27 weeks)

Your baby's brain is developing rapidly, and a special type of brown fat that keeps the baby warm at birth is forming. Baby girls develop around 3 million eggs in their ovaries during this month, and your baby's bones are becoming solid. By the end of the sixth month your baby will be around 27 to 36cm long and weigh about 700g.

You will feel a lot more movement as your baby grows larger, stronger and more active. You are likely to have many of the same symptoms as in month 5 and may also begin to have an itchy abdomen. Emotionally, absent-mindedness, boredom and anxiety are common at this stage.

Women whose blood group is Rh-negative sometimes form antibodies when carrying an Rh-positive baby. This is most likely during birth but occasionally happens in late pregnancy. It can cause anaemia, and sometimes death, in an Rh-positive baby in a later pregnancy. Giving the mother anti-D after the birth reduces the problem, and the NHS now also offers routine anti-D injections during pregnancy, usually at around 28 weeks, to all Rh-negative women.

Month 7 (28 to 31 weeks)

Your baby's eyes can now open and close and sense changes in light, and your baby can hear the outside world quite well over the sound of your heartbeat. The baby exercises by kicking and stretching. By the end of this month your baby will be approximately 40cm long and weigh about 1kg.

You are likely to still experience constipation, heartburn, indigestion, wind and bloating, and your lower abdomen may ache. Your whitish discharge is getting heavier. Other common symptoms include leg cramps, backache, varicose veins, mild swelling, shortness of breath, difficulty sleeping and clumsiness. You are probably also feeling Braxton Hicks contractions, which are usually painless: your uterus hardens for a minute and then returns to normal. By this stage many women feel bored and weary of being pregnant. It is normal to feel you just want it to be over.

Month 8 (32 to 35 weeks)

Your baby's body continues to grow quickly and the taste buds are developing. Your baby may now hiccup, cry and respond to pain, light and sound. If you are having a boy, his testicles are descending into the scrotum. Your baby will be about 40 to 45cm long and weigh about 1.8kg.

This month your baby's position (presentation) can be determined, either by examination or by ultrasound. If the baby is breech or lying across the womb, moxa and acupuncture are the kindest treatment to help turn your baby into the correct position. This is also the time to discuss your birth plan with your midwife, including pain relief during labour and delivery. You will be feeling strong, regular movements.

Many of the discomforts of the last few months, such as constipation and shortness of breath, become more frequent, and Braxton Hicks contractions will increase. Eagerness for the pregnancy to be over, and apprehension about your baby's health and about labour and delivery, are probably increasing.

Month 9 (36 weeks to birth)

Your baby is now gaining about 250g each week and is getting ready for birth, settling into the fetal position with its head down against the birth canal and its legs tucked up to its chest. The rapid flow of blood through the umbilical cord keeps it taut, which helps prevent tangles. Your baby is beginning to develop sleeping patterns. The bones of the head are soft and flexible to ease delivery through the birth canal. Your baby's lungs are now mature, and your baby would cope well if born a little early. Your baby is now about 50cm long, weighs approximately 2.7 to 4kg and can be born any time between 37 and 42 weeks.

As well as the discomforts of the last couple of months, you may have aching in your buttocks and pelvis, increased backache and heaviness, more difficulty sleeping and more frequent and intense Braxton Hicks contractions. As your baby drops lower it becomes easier to breathe, but you will need to urinate more often.

Taking Arnica by mouth from week 36 until 4 weeks after delivery, at the recommended daily dose, helps to speed up your recovery from the bruising of childbirth. The dose is so small that the levels in breast milk are virtually undetectable, and the benefits in speeding healing are well proven. You can also massage your perineum (between the vagina and anus) daily from week 36 with vitamin E oil (from 2 broken vitamin E capsules) to reduce the chance of tearing or needing an episiotomy (a surgical cut).

You will probably be feeling excited, anxious, apprehensive and relieved that it is almost over. If labour does not start spontaneously, you will probably be offered a medical induction with a membrane sweep, breaking of your waters or a drug called oxytocin. Breaking the waters and a membrane sweep are invasive and unpleasant, and labour induced with

oxytocin progresses unnaturally quickly, which can result in instrumental deliveries. Natural labour induction with acupuncture is a very successful natural alternative.

Finally, remember to pack your bag so you are ready when the time comes. You won't be pregnant for very much longer!

Our female healthcare philosophy

At the Women's Natural Health Clinic, we specialise in comprehensive natural reproductive, gynaecological, obstetric and general healthcare for women from adolescence to post-menopause. We integrate oriental and western medical diagnosis to create a naturally oriented treatment plan combining herbal medicine, naturopathic medicine, acupuncture, nutritional therapy, exercise and lifestyle, tailored to each woman.

To book an appointment, visit womensnaturalhealthclinic.com/book or call 020 3811 8778.