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Back pain is a common pregnancy symptom, and it doesn't always disappear when your baby arrives. We've got three pain-busting moves and advice from the pros to strengthen your back now—and help ease the ouch as you enter new motherhood.

dROP IN TO ANY PHYSICAL THERAPIST'S OFFICE OR MASSAGE STUDIO AND YOU'RE BOUND TO SEE SOME BABY BUMPS in the waiting room. That's because ligament-loosening hormones, weight gain and a shifting center of gravity all conspire to cause 2 million pregnant women to cry out from back pain every year, especially between the fifth and seventh months. "That's when your uterus, normally housed in the pelvis, suddenly moves into your abdomen, putting a lot of stress on your lower and midback," explains Cambridge, Mass.-based Holly Herman, D.P.T., author of *How to Raise Children Without Breaking Your Back: A Body Manual for New Mothers and the Parents of Small Children* (Ibis Publications). Your spine sways as a result, hampering your posture and compressing the back vertebrae like a smushed Slinky. Mercifully, the discomfort tends to diminish within two weeks of delivery, only to flare up as you begin lifting and carrying a 7- to 10-pound baby up to 50 times a day.

Here's some news to make you sit up (straight!) and take notice: You can start building a better back now. Our pain-busting moves are safe to do while pregnant and may help you avoid medication. Plus, our advice from the pros will keep you comfortable through nine months of pregnancy and into your baby's first year. And remember: No slouching!

(BY **LESLIE GOLDMAN** → PHOTOGRAPHY BY **TED & DEBBIE**)



Back-friendly gear can help alleviate aches.

Ease the ouch while expecting

Research shows that women who exercise three times a week for 12 weeks during the second half of pregnancy have less low-back pain. Incorporate these three back-strengthening exercises and stretches from Sergio Rojas, owner of reDEFINED Fitness & Physical Therapy in Chicago, into your workout routine to strengthen and protect.

Pain relief? We're all ears!

Good news for moms-to-be who don't want to use pain medication: Ear acupuncture can alleviate lower-back pain in pregnant women after just one week, according to new research published in the *American Journal of Obstetrics & Gynecology*. To find an acupuncturist in your area, visit the National Certification Commission of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (nccaom.org).

1 CORE TWIST

Stand with your left foot on one end of a handled resistance tube, feet wide. Hold the other handle with both hands at chest height in front of you and rotate shoulders to the left **[A]**. Pull the band across your body to the right, ending with hands at shoulder height in front of you and torso facing to the right **[B]**. Return to starting position and repeat. Do 10 reps, then repeat with right foot on the tube. (If you don't have a resistance band, hold a 3- to 5-pound dumbbell instead.)

Strengthens: core (which includes your lower back)





2 DEADLIFT TO CURL

Stand with feet a stride's length apart, right foot in front of left. Hold a 5- to 10-pound dumbbell in each hand, arms extended in each side. Bend forward from hips, stopping when your back begins to round **[A]**. Rise up to starting position and bend elbows, curling weights toward shoulders **[B]**. Extend arms to starting position and repeat. Do 5 reps, then repeat with left foot in front of right.

Strengthens: core, hamstrings and biceps

3 TRIANGLE POSE

Stand with feet wide, right foot turned out and right heel aligned with arch of left foot; raise arms to shoulder height and out to sides, palms facing floor. Bend forward from the hips over right leg, placing your right hand on your shin or ankle, as you extend your left arm toward the ceiling, palm facing forward; turn head to look up at ceiling **[shown]**. Hold for 10 to 30 seconds. Repeat on opposite side.

Strengthens: legs; stretches back and legs.



We've got your back

THE RIGHT GEAR CAN HELP ALLEVIATE PAIN.

I'm with the band

Lift the growing weight of your baby bump with a belly support band that shores up the back and abdomen. We like: Upsie Belly support band (\$70, bellybandit.com)

Shoe-in

Supportive sneakers or flat boots are best for everyday use, but if you want some height, try rubber-soled wedges, which distribute body weight across a larger surface area and offer shock absorption. You'll also want to ditch your ballet flats and flip-flops, says New York City podiatrist Jacqueline Sutura, D.P.M. Instead, wear flats with an arch support or try insoles or orthotics.

Support staff

According to the National Sleep Foundation, 78 percent of women report more disturbed sleep during pregnancy than at other times. Not helping matters: An inability to sleep on your back or stomach in the latter months. Placing a wedge under your belly when sleeping on your side can reduce back pain by bracing your bump so it doesn't pull on and strain your back muscles. We like: Boppy Pregnancy Wedge (\$18, boppy.com)





Babying your back after your bub arrives

Nearly every basic mommy move, from diaper changing to car seat wrangling, pulls your shoulders forward. As a result, the muscles in your back react as if you are falling and work extra hard to pull you upright, straining your back even further. Knowing the best way to carry, lift and push your baby can help keep your back in its best shape. Here's how to:

Wear your baby Many popular baby carriers employ ergonomic strapping systems to evenly distribute weight across your shoulders and upper back while holding the infant's weight close to the body. "That allows you to engage your abdominal and back muscles to comfortably carry the baby for a considerable amount of time without fatigue," says Brooklyn, N.Y.-based occupational therapist and industrial designer Carla Jaspers. Be sure to cinch your front carrier tightly around your waist and shoulders. Many carriers have a tendency to pull your shoulders forward; counteract it by "imagining tucking your shoulder blades down into the back pockets of your jeans," suggests Alison Sadowy, P.T., a women's health physical therapist at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn. Prevent muscle fatigue by switching between a variety of carrier positions or styles, like a backpack or a sling.

Lift your baby in/out of the crib Before lifting up your bambino, imagine pulling in and lifting up your lower belly muscles, as you would when trying to fit into a tight pair of jeans. Inhale and hinge from the hips as you lean over, and exhale as you lift your baby.

Carry your baby Hold your baby as close to the center of your body as possible. "The closer the baby is to your center, the less pressure on your back," notes Herman. Try to maintain a neutral spine, but avoid leaning back to balance your bundle on your shoulder. Resist the urge to hike up your hip and rest your baby there, which leads to poor spinal alignment, fatigue and eventually promotes back, hip and shoulder pain.

Breastfeed If you're sitting to nurse, think "straight and tall" and be vigilant about bringing your baby to your breast to avoid hunching

forward. A nursing pillow can help raise her to breast level and offers much needed support for you. Alternate between nursing positions (football hold, side lying) to avoid overtaxing the same muscles. After putting her down, gently clasp your hands behind your head and pull your elbows back for 20 seconds to stretch your chest.

Push the stroller A good rule of thumb to follow when adjusting stroller handle height: Put your hands on your hips. "Feel the two bony prominences in front. The stroller handle should be about that high," Jaspers says.

Transfer the car seat The middle of the back seat is the safest for your baby, but taking your baby and her seat in and out of the car is murder on your back. It's best to leave the seat in the vehicle and just tote your tot in and out, but if you want to carry her in the car seat, try this technique from Chicago firefighter and certified passenger safety technician Brooks Watson, co-founder of Safety Squad, a family safety consulting company: If entering the car from the right passenger side, open the door and place the car seat with your baby in it on the seat. Place your right foot on the floorboard and, keeping your knees soft, contract your abdominal muscles as you use both hands to lift the carrier and drop it into the base. Do the same during removal.

Once your baby weighs 15 pounds, Watson recommends leaving the car seat in its base and just taking your baby in and out.

Hold a diaper bag Schlepping a bulky diaper bag around on one shoulder will overburden your arm, neck and back, throwing off your posture. Jaspers recommends a messenger-style bag to distribute weight more evenly across the body. If your diaper bag is loaded down with more than 25 pounds of baby gear, switch to a backpack style to prevent injury. If you must use a single-shoulder style, be sure to switch sides frequently and look for bags with minimal hardware, which adds weight.

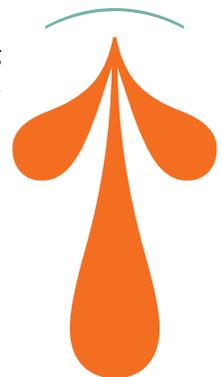
Leslie Goldman is a Chicago-based writer and new mom to 11-month-old Evie.

TIP Be hot & cold

Feel fast relief with these easy tips from physical therapist Alison Sadowy:

Ice For acute back pain (in the first 48 to 72 hours), apply a towel-wrapped ice pack for 15 minutes to ease swelling and slow pain signals to the brain; a bag of frozen vegetables works, too.

Heat To promote healing after the acute phase, use heat to enhance circulation and lessen lingering aches. Place 2 cups of uncooked rice in a cotton sock. Knot the open end and microwave for 60 seconds. Apply to the painful area for 15 minutes.



Cesarean sections and back pain A C-section mama needs to massage her scar to prevent it from adhering to the pelvic organs. "A too-tight scar can reduce your back's range of motion by 30 percent and prevent you from standing up straight," warns physical therapist Holly Herman. When your doctor gives you the go-ahead at your six-week checkup, begin massaging with firm pressure in an up/down, right/left and diagonal direction. You should also try rolling the scar between your fingers. "Just five minutes a day will make an enormous difference," she says.



A carrier can help you tote your tot without breaking your back.

Design a back-friendly nursery

After your newborn arrives, you'll soon realize that seemingly small details in your baby's room, such as the height of the changing table, can make a massive difference in preventing an aching back. "Many new mothers are so focused on their little one's needs, they don't realize just how frequently they're lifting or bending in a way that's not safest for their back," says industrial designer Carla Jaspers. Pain-proof your nursery with these ergonomic tips:

CHANGING TABLE A waist-high changing table will prevent you from leaning over excessively. When standing at the table, "your elbows should be flexed roughly at 90 degrees, your wrists in a neutral position, shoulders relaxed, and your posture upright and comfortable," Jaspers details. Your best bet: Diaper and dress your baby in multiple locations—standing at the changing table or in a kneeling position, with your baby on the bed. "Being a creature of habit breeds back pain," Herman warns, noting that doing anything over and over sets you up for repetitive stress injuries like back pain.

CRIB "Lessen the strain of lifting and putting down the baby with a mattress that reaches your waist height," Jaspers recommends. Once the baby is able to push up on her hands and roll over, you'll need to lower the mattress to avoid her tumbling out of the crib.

GLIDER Make sure your feet are touching the floor when you're seated all the way to the back of the chair to reduce excessive pressure on your back, or purchase a small angled footrest. Try nursing or feeding in multiple spots to avoid getting stuck in a posture rut. ✨