

When Not to Worry

By Marnell Jameson

Six weeks into her pregnancy, Kim Muller started bleeding and cramping. “My husband and I were sure we were losing the baby,” she says, “but the doctor found a heartbeat.” A trouble-free seven months later, Kim gave birth to a healthy girl.

Few women go through pregnancy without at least one anxious moment along the way. Fortunately, most go on to have normal pregnancies. While women with special health conditions, a history of premature labour or multiple foetuses need to pay heed when anything unusual occurs, most women can relax and just let nature take its course.

We're here to help you do just that. What follows is a list of the most common concerns among pregnant women, with guidelines on why you probably don't need to worry – and when you should. As a rule, if in doubt, call your doctor.

Nausea

Though morning sickness (which can last all day) feels bad, it's not bad for the baby. To help alleviate nausea, try eating several small meals a day rather than three larger ones. Also try nibbling on some crackers before getting out of bed. Some women say that foods and drinks containing ginger or lemon help to settle a queasy stomach. If all else fails, keep in mind that morning sickness usually abates by about the twelfth week.

When to call the doctor

Nausea is a concern when severe vomiting causes dehydration. Infrequent urination, as well as urine that's dark and strong-smelling, are key signs. If you notice either of these, call your doctor; she may want to put you on a drip to ensure adequate hydration. Also call your doctor if you can't keep food down or are losing 500g or more a week.

Bleeding

For many women, bleeding is the scariest symptom they might experience because they associate it with miscarriage. But bleeding during pregnancy, especially in the first trimester, is more common than many realise: about 25% of women experience some type of bleeding in the first 13 weeks; of those, more than half have healthy babies. Though bleeding – especially when accompanied by cramping – can be one sign of miscarriage (see “The Facts About Miscarriage” below), it often has other causes.

The most common has to do with the implantation of the egg in the uterus lining. Benign cervical polyps, which are fairly common whether you're pregnant or not, may also be to blame. Another potential cause is cervical bleeding, which can occur after sexual

intercourse in women with tender cervixes. Finally, bleeding can occur when the mucous plug is lost in early labour.

When to call the doctor

Report any bleeding, regardless of the possible causes or when it happens, to your doctor right away.

Cramping

Many women feel something akin to menstrual cramps in the early stages of pregnancy. That aching heaviness in the pelvic area is caused by increased blood flow to the uterus area and is a normal part of early pregnancy.

When to call the doctor

If you notice consistent cramping on only one side, tell your doctor so she can rule out an ectopic pregnancy or ovarian cyst. Also, report cramping if it's accompanied by bleeding. Serious cramping in the second or third trimester is more worrisome, as it could indicate early labour, so report that right away as well.

Contractions

Many women experience random contractions, often called Braxton Hicks contractions, after 24 weeks. These are normal as long as they are irregular and sporadic (as opposed to labour contractions, which occur at regular intervals and increase in frequency and intensity). “Another difference is labour pains are painful; Braxton Hicks are not,” says Dr Paula Penkin, a gynaecologist and Fit Pregnancy advisory-board member.

When to call the doctor

If contractions seem regular – time them to be sure. Your doctor will want to make sure you're not in real labour.

Reduced movement

Women usually start to feel their babies move sometime between weeks 18 and 24. After that first kick, the movements gradually become stronger and more frequent; it can be scary if they suddenly seem to cease. Less movement can be a simple matter of the mother being too busy to notice or the baby being asleep.

When to call the doctor

“If you haven't felt your baby kick by week 20, call your doctor,” advises Dr Penkin. “An ultrasound should also be taken to evaluate the situation.” Chances are the baby has been moving but you simply haven't felt it; your doctor will decide whether to follow up. As far as reduced movement goes, if you haven't felt your baby move all day, have some juice or crackers, then sit or lie down with your hands on your belly. If an hour or two go

by and you still haven't felt any action, call your doctor. Chances are there's nothing wrong, but she may want you to come in for a little monitored reassurance.

Discharge

Unusual and excessive discharge is a part of pregnancy. Your cervix is undergoing many changes, which create normal mucous discharge.

When to call the doctor

If discharge is accompanied by burning, itching or a foul smell, you may have an infection.

Wetness

When a pregnant woman sees wet sheets her first thought is that her water has broken. But chances are it's only urine: pressure on the bladder can make you leak without noticing.

When to call the doctor

If the wetting persists or seems like a lot, call your doctor. She'll want to be sure you're not leaking amniotic fluid, which is a concern before the 37th week because such leakage could trigger labour or lead to infection.

Swelling

Pregnant women retain excess fluid because of the extra water-retaining hormones in the body. In addition, a woman's blood volume increases by 30 to 50% in preparation for labour and delivery. Unfortunately, there's not much you can do about the puffiness. If you're swollen, keeping your legs up will help; so will swimming. Even sitting in a pool up to your chin will help redistribute the water in your body.

When to call the doctor

Sudden swelling accompanied by a headache may be a sign of pre-eclampsia, a dangerous condition. Call your doctor if you experience this after your 28th week. It's crucial to remember that most babies come out just fine. Besides her bleeding scare, Kim had other worries during her three pregnancies, including chronic vomiting with one and lack of movement with two. "Now that I've had three perfectly healthy babies," she says, "I realise I could have worried a lot less."

The facts about miscarriage

It's somewhat reassuring to know that there is very little you can do to either cause or prevent a miscarriage. You can't provoke one: riding a motorcycle, having sex, getting hysterical – none of that will impact your pregnancy. Ninety-nine percent of the time, miscarriages happen for genetic or other internal reasons. The exceptions are extreme situations such as traumatic accidents or drug addiction. What's more, nothing you do will make a difference if you start bleeding or cramping. If other women tell you to lie

down, it is not because it will help prevent a miscarriage but because it gives them a sense of control in this frightening situation. If you do have a miscarriage, you may find some comfort in knowing that all is not lost: the vast majority of women who miscarry go on to have healthy babies.