

Round Ligament Pain

Round ligament pain is usually experienced as sharp or shooting pains in the lower abdominal area. It is often felt on the sides of the abdomen and can be either sharp and brief, or longer and dull.

The round ligaments (one on each side) attach the uterus to the pubic bone, and they stretch from 2 inches, their normal length, to about 12 inches at full term. This stretching can cause muscle spasms and nerve irritation nearby, resulting in different aches and pains in the belly and pelvis.

Round ligament pain is a normal part of pregnancy. However, if the pains feel like contractions, or if you have fever or vomiting, or have leaking of fluid or bleeding, call your doctor or midwife right away. They will want to make sure that it is not premature labor, appendicitis, or gallbladder disease.

Treatments:

1. Rest: Try lying on the opposite side of the pain, curling up in a ball, on your side, with a pillow under your belly for support and another one between your legs. Try to breathe into the pain, letting your breath gently massage and relax the area.

2. Heat: A warm bath may help. Try a heating pad or a hot-water bottle on the painful area.

3. Take it easy: Cut back on vigorous activities to see if that helps. If you have to work vigorously (for example, carrying things, climbing stairs, lifting and turning), do it very slowly to prevent muscle spasm. If you know that you are going to sneeze, cough, or laugh, bend over and flex your hips to reduce the pull on the ligaments.

4. Do hip-hiker exercises, to relieve pain: Stand next to a wall or a countertop, with your painful side away from the support object. Hold on for balance. Lift the foot on your painful side off the floor a little. Now lift your hip bone on the painful side, straight upward. Hold for 30 seconds. Keep the rest of your body erect, only moving your pelvis. Try to stay as upright as possible, without twisting or bending. Hold for a count of ten. Then bring your leg back down, and stand evenly on both feet for a moment. Repeat as needed.

5. Do pelvic rocks, to strengthen the back and belly muscles, which will help relieve the pull on the ligaments:

Pelvic rock on hands and knees: Get on your hands and knees with your knees a foot apart. As you exhale, tighten your belly muscles and raise up your lower back. Let your head hang down loose. Hold for five seconds. Inhale as you relax back to the starting position. Repeat five times.

Pelvic rock lying down: Lie on the floor (not on the bed) on your back, with your knees bent and your feet flat on the ground. Inhale as you tighten your belly muscles and flatten the small of your back on the floor. Hold this for a count of five as you exhale. Repeat five times.

6. Ask for someone to help you (spouse, special friend, doctor or midwife):

Belly lift, for a helper: Have mom stand leaning on a counter. Standing behind her, lace your fingers together and place them underneath the mom's pregnant belly. (Good idea for mom to empty her bladder first.) Then slowly and gently lift the belly up and cradle its full weight in your hands, allowing mom to completely relax. Hold for a few seconds and then gently release.

Belly lift, with a rebozo: Same as above, but standing behind mom, use a rebozo (a wide shawl) to lift and support the belly. You can gently rock or wiggle the heavy belly back and forth while mom relaxes.

7. Belly support:

For round ligament and low back pain, you can try wearing a belt or a wide bandage to support the belly. See online: maternityandnursing.com, fitmaternity.com, underworks.com/maternity, and others... or ask your doctor or midwife to look at these sites and help find a local store that sells them.

If you want to wear a support belt or garment, put it on while you are lying on the floor with your knees up, so your pelvis and spine are properly aligned.

Do not wear support garments all day, every day during pregnancy, but only when you are at risk for increased pain. You don't want your back and belly muscles to get weak, which would lead to worse aches and pains. Keep doing pelvic rock and hip-hiker exercises to keep these muscles working.

What mothers say:

"If I walk very far, it starts to ache, and then I get sharp stabs if I move too quickly or bend at a difficult angle."

"I only feel them when standing and walking. Not terribly painful but very annoying."

"Feels like I am bruised real bad on my left side. It can also hurt when I'm sitting and doing nothing."

"Mine cause cramping so bad I literally must pull my knee as close to my chest as I can, and I don't move for 20 minutes."

"It's like I'm being stabbed with a huge needle. I'm 30 weeks. Called my doctor last night, and she kept saying 'yep, that's normal.' I was so frustrated."

"I'm not even in my second trimester, but I feel it all the way down to my vagina, not just in my belly."

"It was worse for me when I spent any time on my feet, which I do for a living. What worked for me was to buy a belly brace. I found one for about \$30."

"I thought they are only supposed to be jabs and then they go away? Well, mine hasn't gone away."

"The worst I've had was yesterday when I went for a walk in the cold. I had to slow down and breathe slowly to make it stop. I think that cold weather makes it worse."

"OUCH... it can make you sweat!"

Pubic symphysis separation

If treatment of round ligament pain (heat, rest, exercises) doesn't help at all, and the pain is disabling, your doctor or midwife should rule out a pubic symphysis separation. The pubic symphysis is the joint between the two halves of the pubic bone in front. The pain would be pubic, inner thigh, pelvic, and even sometimes lower back. The joint itself is tender to the touch.

The normal "give" of the symphysis is a space of about 9mm. If it is 10mm or more, it is considered a separation. Note: a minor degree of separation may be normal and not cause pain.

Any activity that involves lifting one leg at a time or parting the legs tends to be particularly painful. Lifting the leg to put on clothes, getting out of a car, sitting down and getting up, walking up stairs, and lifting heavy objects tend to be difficult. Turning over in bed may be especially bad.

Some women experience 'freezing,' where they get up out of bed and find it hard to move their legs right away; the range of hip movement is usually limited by pain, including opening the legs. Some women also feel a 'clicking' when they walk. Severe round ligament pain and sciatica can accompany pubic separation. Pubic separation can also be associated with urinary incontinence (leaking urine), especially when rising to a standing position.

Some doctors believe that no real treatment is possible, and that it is just a matter of waiting it out. Bedrest, painkillers, and anti-inflammatories are the typical recommendations. You must to keep your knees together as much as possible, and avoid squatting and lunging. You can try wearing a support belt. However, if the pelvic bones are not lined up correctly, a belly brace might actually increase the pain. If that happens, just stop wearing it.

It can take months after birth for the pelvis to be completely stable again. Treatment after birth is the same as during pregnancy. The good news is, you have a very low risk of obstructed labor and are not likely to need a cesarean section for this reason. Many women never experience a painful separation again, as if the pubic joint heals a little wider and stays that way.