

**PREGNANCY**

Well Adjusted™

# Red Flags

THAT SHOULD NOT BE IGNORED



If a pregnant woman tells you she is experiencing any of the following symptoms during pregnancy, assist her to contact her emergency care professional right away. Collaborative care is both indicated and necessary.



**Red Flag** — a term that refers to a life-threatening conditioning or potentially serious condition requiring extended attention.. In the pregnant woman a red flag scenario could threaten the life of the mother, her unborn child or both.

*It is important that the mother is made aware that all of her carers need to be informed if she:*

- *is drinking alcohol daily*
- *has started or returned to smoking*
- *is taking an over-the-counter medication*
- *has blood in her urine*
- *has signs of a yeast infection*

## VAGINAL BLEEDING

One out of every four women may have vaginal bleeding at some point during pregnancy. Vaginal bleeding may not be serious or it could be a sign of a miscarriage, ectopic pregnancy or a problem with the placenta it is therefore important she contact her carer's straight away and find out the cause. Leaking clear fluid could mean her "waters have broken" and that her labor is imminent.

Spotting during pregnancy without pain may be a normal sign of implantation (when the embryo attaches itself to the uterus early in the pregnancy) or breakthrough bleeding. An ectopic pregnancy may present as bleeding that is different from a normal period (heavier or lighter and often darker) with severe, persistent, one-sided pain in the abdomen.

Miscarriage or potential miscarriage may be indicated by heavy bleeding, especially when it's combined with persistent back or abdominal pain. Placenta praevia (low lying placenta) or placental abruption (which happens when the placenta starts to separate from the wall of the uterus) may present in the later stages of pregnancy with bleeding.

It is important a pregnant woman attend her emergency carer immediately if she has any vaginal bleeding or leaking. She will require emergency care if she has vaginal bleeding with any of the following:

- Severe abdominal pain
- Fainting or lightheadedness
- The baby is moving much less or has sudden violent movements

## LEAKING FLUID

Leaking of fluid from the vagina before 37 weeks means that the mothers membranes have ruptured prematurely. She will require monitoring from her emergency carer to prevent an infection and to prepare for premature delivery.

After 37 weeks, she will probably move into labour and be made aware of her options if labour does not start within 24 hours.

## SEVERE ABDOMINAL OR BACK PAIN

This may indicate an ectopic pregnancy (if early in pregnancy), a problem with the placenta or preterm labor. Advise the mother to attend her emergency carer immediately.

## CONTRACTIONS

Contractions may signal labor. The following are signs that delivery may be very imminent, or that there is a serious life-threatening problem:

- The contractions are intense
- The mother feels like she has to push or have a bowel movement
- She experiences a heavy vaginal bleeding — emergency care required.
- Her water's have broken or her umbilical cord is protruding from her vagina or she feels like there is something in her vagina — emergency care required
- Her waters have broken and it is thick, yellow, green or brown — emergency care required
- Her baby has stopped moving or has violent movements — emergency care required
- If she feels like she may pass out

Urge her to attend her emergency carer right away if she is not full term and she is experiencing contractions or any of the above symptoms.

For a full term mother advise her to get to hospital or to her carers if her water has broken or if her contractions are intense and three minutes apart (five minutes if she has delivered before).

## DECREASE OR SHARP INCREASE IN THE BABY'S MOVEMENTS

If the mother feels that her unborn baby is not moving as much as she normally experiences (i.e. she notices less action) this could be a sign of foetal distress. If this lack of movement is prior to a mothers due delivery

week (as baby's become less active just prior to initiating labour) then it is important she explains her concerns to her carers and an assessment of the baby is made immediately.

Sudden violent movements of the baby can also be a sign that the baby is in distress. She needs to seek immediate medical help.

## CHANGES IN VISION

Blurry vision during pregnancy could be a sign of gestational diabetes (diabetes during pregnancy) or pre-eclampsia. This is a serious condition marked by high blood pressure and protein in the urine.

Encourage the mother to attend her carer if she suddenly has trouble seeing, experiences double vision, blurring, dimming, flashing spots or lights that last for more than two hours. The symptoms can be a sign of pre-eclampsia.

## FREQUENT, PAINFUL HEADACHES

This may be due to nerve dysfunction, changes in hormones, increased blood circulation and other causes. If the mother is experiencing frequent unrelenting headaches this may be a symptom of pre-eclampsia and she will need to notify her carers. She may need to attend the emergency room (after notifying her carer) if she has a severe headache along with nausea or vomiting.

## SWELLING OF HER HANDS, FACE, EYES OR FEET

In most cases this should not cause alarm. If these symptoms however are severe or sudden, and accompanied by a **headache, problems with vision, dizziness, convulsions or sudden rise in blood pressure** these signs may indicate pre-eclampsia or more dangerously, eclampsia, which can lead to organ damage. Immediate emergency assessment is required.

## ALL-OVER ITCHING LATE IN PREGNANCY

Some itching during pregnancy due to abdominal growth is normal as the mother's skin stretches to accommodate her growing baby. If the itching is very intense, worse at night and involves the soles of the feet and the palms of the hands these symptoms may indicate a liver-based condition, such as obstetric cholestasis (OC). If a mother has OC she may also have jaundice, and pass dark urine and pale stools. Advanced assessment may be required.

## VOMITING AND DIARRHOEA

If a mother has prolonged vomiting or diarrhoea at any stage of her pregnancy then an infection may be indicated. If she is unable to keep foods and liquids down and becomes dehydrated her baby will not be getting the nourishment he or she needs to grow which can be dangerous. Immediate emergency attention may be required.

## PAIN OR BURNING WHEN URINATING

This may mean the mother has a urinary tract infection. Prompt assessment is important as some vaginal infections are linked to pre-term birth and low birth-weight babies. The pro's and cons of various treatments for infection can be discussed once an assessment has been made.

## FEVER OR CHILLS

These are symptoms of the flu but could be a sign of a more serious infection in a pregnant woman. It is important to assist the mother in monitoring a fever and if any complications arise it is important to seek extended care right away.

If the mother has fever above 37.5°C (99.5°F), but with no flu or cold symptoms she needs to seek extended care.

If the mother has a temperature greater than 39°C (102.2°F), she needs to attend her emergency carer straight away.

## AN ACCIDENT, A FALL OR A BLOW TO THE BELLY

Not all falls are harmful to growing babies. A pregnant mother should however be monitored after an accident or fall for signs of emotional or physical distress such as bleeding, the leaking of amniotic fluid or contractions.

## HAVING THOUGHTS OF HARMING HERSELF OR HER UNBORN BABY

If a mother has symptoms of depression, it is important to help her gather a team of support and appropriate carers. Co-ordinate collaborative care for her with her doctor.

### **SOURCES**

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Pregnancy symptoms you should never ignore <http://www.babycentre.co.uk/pregnancy/antenatal-health/pregnancysymptoms>

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