

Pregnancy the natural way – month by month

Many patients ask me 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 explanation of the path from conception to birth, the associated ailments and how these can be treated in a natural way.

MONTH ONE

1–4 weeks post positive pregnancy test

Shortly after implantation, the placenta and umbilical cord begin to form. The placenta and umbilical cord provide nourishment and oxygen to your baby and carry away the baby's wastes. Your baby is enclosed in a sac of fluid, called the amniotic sac, which protects your baby from bumps and pressure. By week 2 or 3 your baby's heart is beating and development speeds up. By the third week after implantation the baby has a spinal cord.

During this time you may experience fatigue and sleepiness, frequent urination, nausea, vomiting, heartburn, indigestion, bloating, food aversions or cravings, and breast changes. These pregnancy symptoms are entirely normal and vary from woman to woman. You may experience all of them, just a few, or none of them. Emotionally, you may feel irritable, have mood swings, may act irrationally, and cry easily. These emotions are similar to those experienced by women who have premenstrual syndrome. It is also not uncommon to have a variety of 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 facilitate sleeping. Weekly acupuncture to calm the spirit and engender blood is also extremely helpful in smoothing the journey in these early weeks.

From the time you know you are pregnant there are many things to consider, firstly giving up smoking and alcohol is strongly advised. There are now a huge number of undisputable studies that show smoking and alcohol consumption in the first few weeks of pregnancy particularly, cause foetal development abnormalities.

Consider your lifestyle. I always explain to newly pregnant patients that for the next 12 weeks (until the baby is fully formed) they are a walking incubator and incubators keep everything as constant for the baby as possible. The analogy is not completely accurate but you see my point. Therefore ideally we want to see everything in your life constant also. Not too much exercise, but some, don't get too cold or too hot, get enough sleep but don't over sleep. There are many more similar aspects that your practitioner will explain, all of which reduce miscarriage probability.

There are also some important tests to consider. If you have had more than one miscarriage in the last two years I recommend monitoring progesterone levels and Beta Human Chorionic Gonadotropin (BCHG) levels. BCHG is a hormone which stimulates the production of oestrogen and progesterone. These two hormones are essential to healthy and ongoing development of an early pregnancy. The maternal progesterone from the corpus luteum is essential in maintaining the uterine lining as implantation progresses. If the level is insufficient then early miscarriages often follow. If your BHCG is insufficient this is an indication of a compromised placenta causing slower development of the foetus and in many cases failure of the pregnancy. Both these conditions can be treated very effectively with herbal medicine and acupuncture but early action is needed.

MONTH TWO

Weeks 5–8

By the end of week 6 of pregnancy, your baby has a head and body and limb buds. This month is especially critical in the development of your baby. Any disturbance from drugs, viruses, or environmental factors such as pesticides, chemicals, radiation may cause birth defects. Your baby's development is very rapid during the second month and all of your baby's major body organs and body systems, including the brain, lungs, liver, and stomach, have begun to develop.

Many women do not feel pregnant during these early weeks. This is common. It is also normal to feel very tired, to urinate often, to feel nausea, to vomit, to have excess saliva, to be constipated, to have heartburn, indigestion, flatulence, or bloating, to experience food aversions or cravings, to feel changes and fullness in your breasts, have occasional headaches and to feel faint or dizzy occasionally. Emotions are likely to be very similar to the first month of pregnancy

The next consideration is where the pregnancy is developing. The risks of ectopic pregnancy (pregnancy outside the normal position), is 2 – 3% for natural pregnancies and 4 – 6% for assisted pregnancies. An early ultrasound scan at between 6 and 7 weeks from your last menstrual period can determine if the baby is alive, how many pregnancies exist and whether they are developing in the correct part of your uterus. This can often be arranged at your local hospital maternity department or directly with a private clinic.

MONTH THREE

Weeks 10–14

Your baby will be completely formed by the end of the third month. Your baby will have 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 and toes are now formed. The baby's hands are also developed. Tooth buds have formed under the baby's gums. Vocal cords develop around the 13th week of pregnancy. Kidneys are now developed and start draining urine into the bladder. Intestines have formed outside of the baby on the umbilical cord (because they can't fit inside the baby). By the end of this month the placenta has now fully taken over production of progesterone.

It is helpful by the end of month 3 to have decided which hospital or midwife you want to register with to care for your pregnancy as there are some important things that take place at your 12 week antenatal appointment. Your health care provider will check your weight; your blood pressure, your urine for sugar and protein, and the size of your growing baby to more accurately date your gestation and determine the most accurate delivery date. Many of the early physical pregnancy symptoms continue during the third month. Nausea can be very effectively treated with acupuncture and you may wish to pursue this with your acupuncturist. Fresh ginger tea infusions can also help to calm your stomach.

Emotions may continue to switch back and forth between happiness, fear, joy, misgivings and you may still feel somewhat unstable. However, many women begin to experience a welcomed sense of calmness around this time. This is also the right time to consider whether you want to have chromosome abnormality screening. This can be done at your hospital or privately with a nuchal scan and BHCG and PAPP (a blood test) which together are now 95% accurate in detecting Down (trisomy 21), Edwards (trisomy 18) and Patau's (trisomy 13) chromosome abnormalities. In addition usually a routine blood test is taken at this time to check for diabetes risk and to establish your blood group and rhesus status.

MONTH FOUR

Weeks 15–19

Your baby's eyebrows and eyelashes begin to appear in this month. Buds on the side of the head begin to form into the outer ear. The head makes up about half of the baby's size. The baby moves, sleeps, wakes, swallows, and passes urine. You may start to feel a slight fluttering sensation in your lower abdomen. By the end of the fourth month, your baby will be 20 to 25cm long and will weigh about 170g. This is the month that many women start to feel pregnant. Physically, you may still be fatigued, feel constipated, have indigestion, heartburn, flatulence, or bloating, and experience occasional headaches and dizziness. Some of the symptoms you may have had during the first trimester will likely decrease or disappear. Morning sickness should be starting to decrease also. If not then continued acupuncture once per week will be a very effective and safe way to manage this.

New symptoms that you may experience include: nasal congestion and occasional nosebleeds, ear stuffiness, bleeding gums, increase in your appetite, mild swelling in your ankles, feet, hands, and face, varicose veins in your legs, a slight whitish vaginal discharge, clumsiness, and possibly fetal movement toward the end of the month. You may have none, some, or all of these symptoms. Your emotions are likely to still swing back and forth between joy, apprehension and irritability. Many women feel frustrated and self-conscious about their bodies when they don't fit into their regular clothes but are still too small for maternity clothes.

MONTH FIVE

Weeks 20–24

This is a period of rapid growth for your baby. The internal organs are maturing. Your baby's fingernails have grown to the tips of the fingers.

Fat is now being stored beneath your baby's skin. Your baby is also growing muscle and is getting stronger every day. Your baby sleeps and wakes at regular intervals. You will find that your baby is much more active now. He or she turns from side to side and head over heels. At the end of the fifth month, your baby will be about 25 – 30cm long and will weigh about 450g.

You will be experiencing some of the following: fetal movement, increasing whitish vaginal discharge, lower abdomen aching, constipation, heartburn, indigestion, flatulence, or bloating, occasional headaches, faintness, or dizziness, nasal congestion, nosebleeds, ear stuffiness, bleeding gums, hearty appetite, leg cramps, swelling, varicose veins, hemorrhoids, increased heart rate, backache, changes in the skin pigmentation of your abdomen and face.

Emotions are probably calming down now and you are likely to have fewer mood swings though you may still feel irritable and forgetful from time to time. By now your morning sickness should have disappeared completely. This month your hospital or midwife will schedule an anomaly ultrasound scan (usually at 20 weeks) to thoroughly check your baby's development and measure growth. This is also the time to ask for gender identification if you and your partner wish to know.

MONTH SIX

Weeks 25–28

Your baby's brain is developing rapidly. A special type of brown fat that keeps your baby warm at birth is forming. Baby girls will 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 36 cm long and will weigh about 700g. You will be feeling a lot more fetal activity as your baby grows larger and stronger, his or her bones become solid, and he or she becomes more active. You are likely to still experience many of the same symptoms as in month 5 and in addition you may also begin to have an itchy abdomen.

Emotionally, absent-mindedness, boredom, and anxiety are common during this period of your pregnancy. Women whose blood group is Rh-negative sometimes form Rh-antibodies when carrying a Rh-positive baby. This is more likely during birth, but occasionally happens in late pregnancy. It can cause anemia, and sometimes death, for a Rh-positive baby in a subsequent pregnancy. Giving the mother anti-D after the first birth does reduce the problems, but giving anti-D during pregnancy is likely to help as well.

MONTH SEVEN

Weeks 29–33

Your baby's eyes can now open and close and can sense light changes. He or she can now 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 be experiencing constipation, heartburn, indigestion, flatulence, and bloating. Your lower abdomen may feel achy as well. Your whitish vaginal discharge is getting increasingly heavy. Other common physical symptoms include leg cramps, backaches, varicose veins, mild swelling, shortness of breath, difficulty sleeping, and clumsiness. You are probably also feeling Braxton Hicks contractions that are usually painless. During a Braxton Hicks contraction, your uterus hardens for a minute and then returns to normal. By this time, women often find themselves feeling bored and a bit weary about their pregnancy. It is normal to feel like you just want this to be over.

MONTH EIGHT

Weeks 34–38

Your baby's body continues to grow quickly. 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 have dropped from his abdomen where they will then descend into his scrotum. Your baby will be about 40 to 45cm long and will weigh about 1.8kg. This is the month that you will be able to determine your baby's presentation. This is diagnosed either by physical examination or by ultrasound. If the baby is breech or transverse then moxa and acupuncture is the kindest treatment to turn your baby into the correct presentation. This is the time to communicate and discuss your birth plan with your midwife including pain management during labor and delivery. You will be feeling strong, regular fetal activity.

Many of the discomforts you have been experiencing the last few months with constipation and shortness of breath are becoming more frequent. Braxton Hicks contractions will increase. Eagerness to have the pregnancy over and apprehension about the baby's health and labour and delivery are probably increasing.

MONTH NINE

Weeks 39–43

Your baby is now gaining about a 250g each week, he or she is getting ready for birth and is settling into the fetal position with its head down against the birth canal, its legs tucked up to its chest with its knees against its nose. The rapid flow of blood through the umbilical cord keeps it taut which prevents tangles. Your baby is also beginning to develop sleeping patterns. The bones of baby's head are soft and flexible to ease the process of delivery through the birth canal. Your baby's lungs are now mature and your baby would survive fine if born a little early. Your baby is now about 50cm long and weighs approximately 2.7 to 4kg and can be born anytime between the 36th and 43rd week of pregnancy. In addition to the pregnancy discomforts you have been feeling the last couple of months, you may have some discomfort and aching in your buttocks and pelvic area, increased backache and heaviness, more difficulty sleeping and more frequent and intense

Braxton Hicks contractions. Due to the lower position of your baby, it will be easier for you to breathe but you will need to urinate more frequently. You will likely be feeling more excited, anxious, apprehensive, and relieved that it is almost over. If spontaneous labour is not forthcoming then you will probably be offered a medical induction usually with a drug called oxytocin. There are very successful natural alternatives with acupuncture labour induction which you can ask your acupuncturist to try before you agree to drug induction.

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

Trevor Wing MBRCP, MRCHM, MBAcC, BSc(hons), MSc(dist)

Trevor specialises in the natural treatment of female health (gynaecology, obstetrics and reproductive medicine) using oriental herbal medicine, naturopathic medicine and acupuncture. He lectures internationally and has published research into the use of herbs on female infertility. He is currently working on advanced research into the use of herbal medicine to improve endometrial receptivity.

You can contact Trevor at www.naturalgynae.com
or by emailing enquiries@naturalgynae.com