Rib pain during pregnancy
Rib pain is common during pregnancy, especially in the last trimester

Pregnancy hormones relax your ligaments. This loosening can allow your ribs to shift and move in different ways, sometimes causing discomfort. As the baby grows and fills up your abdomen, it puts further pressure on your ribs and chest.

Additionally, your breasts may increase by one full cup size or more. The extra weight pulls your shoulders forward and down, and places strain on the upper back, neck and the ribcage.

The pain you feel could be mildly sore, extremely tender, bruised, or a sharp pain. You may have discomfort on either side, or both sides, though it is commonly worse on the right side of the ribs.

This upward pressure from your baby may also make you feel short of breath. This pressure on your ribs and diaphragm may also result in shoulder pain, because there are nerves in the diaphragm that can refer pain into the shoulders.

Indigestion or acid reflux can cause pain in the ribs as your baby puts pressure on your stomach.

You may feel pain in your ribs due to a urinary infection. If you are experiencing rib pain plus pain in your side with kidney discomfort or difficulty urinating, painful urination, or burning with urination, contact your doctor.
Preventing rib pain

Stretching and prenatal yoga are great for keeping your body strong and flexible. The less slumped you are, the less your ribcage will hurt.

Practise good posture. Sit straight with your shoulders back and head up.

Be sure to wear a bra that is supportive, but not too tight. Underwired bras may press on your ribs and aggravate pain. Now may be a good time to invest in a good nursing bra. They offer support without being too tight and will be useful once your baby is born.

Wear loose clothing so that you do not add any extra pressure to your belly.

Practise gentle exercises with deep breathing exercises regularly throughout the day and before bedtime.

Try the following exercise:

Hold your arms over your head to expand your ribcage and provide temporary relief from rib pain by lifting the ribs away from the uterus. If you have pain on one side in particular, you may find bending away from that side helpful. In that position, take a few deep breaths to stretch the muscles between your ribs further.
Positions of ease

These positions can help stretch the muscles between the affected ribs.

Take five large breaths in and out. Imagine every part of your lung expanding and filling, and each and every rib space opening.

Sitting comfortably on the floor, bed or mat, slowly slide your arms forward.

Take five large breaths. Return to sitting. Repeat three times.

You may want to support your leg with a pillow beneath the knee. Avoid this asymmetrical sleeping position if it causes hip or pelvic pain.
Sitting in a chair ensures good posture.

With your arms above your head, bend away from the side of your pain.

In this position, take two large breaths in and out, filling your lungs. Return to the starting position with your arms above your head.

Repeat five to 10 times. If you are experiencing pain on both sides, perform to the left and to the right.

Pain while stretching

If you feel pain while stretching and it stops when you finish the session, this is a good sign. It means you are stretching tight tissues.

If your stretches increase your pain for more than 10 minutes, when you next perform the stretches either reduce the repetitions or perform the stretch more gently.

Only then, if the pain persists, stop the aggravating stretch until your next appointment.
Heat treatment

A **hot water bottle** should only be half filled so that it can be moulded to the area to be treated.

**Gel packs** are available from large chemists and can usually be heated in the microwave or in a saucepan of boiling water. Ensure you have read the instructions fully before use.

**Wheat packs** are similar to gel packs and are heated in the microwave. They are available from some health food shops.

**Electric pads** vary in size from a small pad to a whole blanket. They are convenient and easy to use.

**Heat lamps** are no more effective than other forms of heat, but are bulky and can be cumbersome to use.

Cold treatment

Cold treatment:

- is useful if pain is restricted to one small area
- is used when a joint is recently hot and swollen
- reduces pain by numbing the area and stimulating the body’s natural painkillers
- reduces swelling by increasing the circulation.
How to use frozen peas or gel packs

Wrap peas or a cold gel pack in a damp towel to make a cold pack.

Position yourself comfortably and ensure the area to be treated is supported. Mould the cold pack around the affected area.

Check the skin after a few minutes to ensure the skin is not burning. (It is normal for the skin to go pink, but it should not look mottled). Leave the cold pack in place for 20 to 30 minutes.

If your symptoms are not improving, contact your midwife or GP for a referral to physiotherapy.
Please note that if for any reason you would value a second opinion concerning your diagnosis or treatment, you are entirely within your rights to request this. The first step would usually be to discuss this with the doctor or other lead clinician who is responsible for your care.

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