

Breast Feeding is a Physical Activity

Jeanne has a seven-month-old baby whom she is breast-feeding and is carrying frequently on one side or the other throughout the day. By nighttime, she complains of pain and burning in her mid-back area. Now she is seeking advice from her physical therapist as to what she should do to help reduce the back discomfort.

What she is describing is very common among new mothers. Let's review the possible reasons for her symptoms. The position of breast-feeding tends to place the mother in a slumped forward posture with the added weight of holding the baby. To reduce the stress on the back I recommended that Jeanne make sure that her feet were supported during breastfeeding. This will help maintain the normal curve of the spine while stabilizing her hips. To avoid a slumped posture, use pillows under the baby to support the baby's weight and under your elbows and forearms during nursing. There are many commercial brands of nursing pillows available that she could try, or just use bed or throw pillows. Placing a pillow behind your back can assist in maintaining good posture so that breast-feeding can be an enjoyable experience, not a painful one.

Carrying and lifting a baby frequently throughout your day can cause burning and aching in your mid- to low-back area. When you hold the baby on one side, it forces the hip to hike upward on that side and the spine to slump forward and sideways. This causes the spine to be held in an awkward, strained position. When the weight of your body leans away from the vertical position, your muscles must work overtime to hold your body up and your joints are loaded in an imbalanced way. Obviously a mother will need to lift and hold her baby frequently, but there are techniques you can learn to minimize the stress placed on your back.

The spine functions best when it is kept in good postural alignment (vertical). When holding your baby, maintain a balanced posture by keeping your abdominals tightened and contracted. Even while indoors, wear comfortable shoes with low heels and a good arch support to improve shock absorption through the spine and promote alignment. Learn and practice correct lifting techniques, like bending from your knees, not your back, when picking up your baby. She was advised to use a waist level changing table and crib to reduce the need to bend below the knees. If standing for a prolonged period of time in one position, prop one foot up on a footstool. This helps maintain the proper curve of your spine. These were some of the teaching interventions during her physical therapy sessions. Jeanne also received manual techniques and therapeutic exercises to strengthen her core muscles which support her back and facilitate good posture. Keeping your body fit with a walking or exercise program, particularly after childbirth, will help your body to withstand the strain of carrying your baby. If you are experiencing these symptoms, consult your local physical therapist.