

Understanding and Managing Pelvic Girdle Pain



The Pelvic Partnership have provided you with a lot of information about Pelvic Girdle Pain on this website - what it is and what it might mean and how it might impact you.

This article is to help you understand a little more about your pain so that you can take some positive steps towards managing it.

How can you manage pain from PGP?

First, understand the pain.....

Managing persistent pain requires a mind-body approach. A common framework to understanding pain and identifying ways to manage it, is the biopsychosocial perspective. This model captures the mind-body connection as it identifies pain as an experience that results from a deep, complex and dynamic interaction among three domains, biological (genetics, biochemistry), psychological (emotions, beliefs about pain, memories, behaviour) and social (culture, family, socio-economics). We all have different biological and genetic make-ups, this coupled with our different life experiences and influences determines how we manage and cope with our world. Pain can feel worse when the domains are not balanced, and achieving this balance will be different for everyone. We are all unique individuals with our own history and experiences. For example:

How was pain viewed in your family growing up?

Was pain validated or dismissed?

How is pain regarded in your social environment/community/workplace?

Are people expected to power through when they are physically or mentally unwell? Is pregnancy seen as something that should be easy for women?

Is there shame and stigma attached to needing support?

Understanding the nervous system and pain:

If we go a little deeper into our domains, we can get a sense of how to manage PGP better. We know that pain is a condition of the nervous system and is located in the brain. We also understand that the nervous system has two pain pathways, both of which can stimulate the release of different pain-relieving chemicals. They include: "The Bottom-Up Pathway" and the "Top-Down Pathway", and are both mind and body processes).

The "Bottom-Up Pathway" concerns your five senses which identify the sensation of pain and send that information up the spinal cord to the brain (biological). The "Top-Down Pathway" is activated when the brain has received this information that your senses have provided, it interprets it and makes an appropriate response. This pathway is driven by your knowledge within your brain and is based on thoughts, feelings and memories of life experiences (psychological, social) - THIS IS YOUR MIND.

These top-down and bottom-up pathways are vital in our experience of pain especially because they are also responsible for releasing pain-relieving chemicals. Being the amazing humans we are, we have the power to influence these pathways using both our mind and body!

Then you can use mind-body strategies to manage the pain...

Both pathways need attention and may mean that you need some additional support. I would certainly recommend seeking help from a range of practitioners, family and close friends. Asking your doctor and/or midwife for further information is a good start, seeking a referral to a physiotherapist, osteopath or chiropractor who has experience of treating PGP is vital.

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Experiment with these strategies, what works for some people does not work for others, but they are ideas to help calm the nervous system and release pain-relieving chemicals.

TOP-DOWN - Brain to body strategies:

Try and take steps to better understand your feelings - how do you feel? If you sit with your thoughts and resist blocking them out, what comes up? Fear, anger, guilt, shame, sadness? Write them down and honour them. Share them with loved ones or work through them with a therapist so you feel understood and supported. PGP can be a rocky ride with good days and bad days and you need people on your side to support you.

Use mindfulness strategies to support you. Look to incorporate some mindfulness strategies - try and remain present in the moment, without judging yourself or anything for that matter. Just noticing what is happening around you can help, and this can be done from the comfort of your garden or on the couch with a cup of tea. Ask yourself, what do you see, hear, taste and smell? Whilst it may be tricky, try and resist those fearful or distracting thoughts and just focus on the now.

Feeling safe is vital to help keep your anxiety down. You might feel vulnerable at times and so making sure you're in an environment that feels comfortable and gives you some control will help. Breathwork is an amazing way to let your body know that it is safe, as are relaxing body scan exercises. The breath is a very powerful way to activate your parasympathetic nervous system.

Spiritual practices are a fantastic way to bring calmness into your life. Guided meditations, being in nature and accessing your spiritual community are also great for calming the nervous system.

BOTTOM-UP- Body to brain strategies:

Manual treatment, so "hands-on" therapy from a physiotherapist, osteopath or chiropractor with experience of treating women with PGP is a vital tool in your kit. Ask your doctor to refer you and to also help you get seen at the earliest possible stage in your pregnancy. We know that manual treatment works for PGP.

A massage or a healing touch (such as a hug) from either yourself or your partner can work wonders. Touch is a very powerful way of communicating with the human nervous system and is deeply ingrained in our mind and body as a way to soothe ourselves. It may not be for everyone, so make sure you feel comfortable and do what feels right for you.

Hot or cold sensations can aid pain relief, such as a hot/warm water bottle, cold pack or damp towel if placed on the affected area for a short period.

Other sensory experiences such as being in a pool or bath can help too.

Try and act on your feelings and give yourself a chance to express your feelings rather than squashing them down. This way you may hold this tension in your body otherwise, leading to tight sore muscles.

Sleeping can be a constant struggle for women with PGP and is often disturbed due to pain. If it is possible, I recommend making time to have a nap during the day. Being pregnant and experiencing pain is hard on the body and so resting is crucial.

Gentle movement and exercises suggested by your manual therapy practitioner may help. It is important to do exercises that are designed for your body and your symptoms, rather than a generic plan.

The more you practice these strategies, both bottom-up and top-down, the stronger your neural pathways to calming your nervous system will be. Connecting to the parts of your body that feel pain and focusing on relaxing and soothing them will also be of benefit during birth and postnatally.

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Other points to remember in managing your pain:

Be kind to yourself.

Honour your experience and be compassionate towards yourself.

Do not push through the pain or do things that other people want you to do if you don't want to or know it will cause you pain. Boundaries are crucial. I can't emphasise that enough. This may mean disappointing people but your needs must be prioritised when it comes to managing your PGP.

Give yourself and others time and space to adjust and cope.

Sometimes people do not know what to do when others are in pain. It might feel frustrating for them and they express this in a way where you do not feel heard, or maybe you feel you are a burden. It's upsetting when this happens, and it is important to consider that for others the frustration may be coming from a place where they feel powerless to help you and confused or unsettled by the change that is required from them in considering how to manage the situation. At the same time, they may be wishing things could be "more normal", like it was before you had PGP and were not struggling.

This may be why some people ignore your pain experience. That way they can avoid engaging with how difficult it is not only for you but also for them. If this is happening between you and your partner or close people in your life that are supporting you, it will help to recognise these factors and not to see them as something bad but rather a normal valid experience in the context of experiencing a change in your life situation (your health) that takes time to adjust to. Talking to each other and acknowledging that it is not easy is a loving and kind way to allow everyone's experience to be considered.

How will PGP affect giving birth?

Many women worry about giving birth with PGP. The most important thing to do is speak with your midwife and explore your options so that you understand fully the different choices available to you and at what stages you can change your mind if your initial choice does not feel right. Birthrights.org is an organisation where you can gain some good information about what your rights are during the birth of your baby. Just because you have PGP, it does not mean that certain birth wishes cannot be fulfilled (unless other medical reasons arise). This includes waterbirths, which mums with PGP often ask about.

Women who have taken the time to practice the top-down/bottom-up pain pathway management strategies may find they can more easily settle their nervous system during birth. Calm breathing techniques will remind your body it is safe, and mind-body connections using body scanning can help relax the pelvis during labour and birth.

PGP and future pregnancies:

If PGP has not been treated and if you have not had the opportunity to follow a personalised rehabilitation plan, it is more likely that the condition will return in subsequent pregnancies. Some women feel very fearful about getting PGP and may not have fully recovered from the way the pain made them feel. Pain can be very traumatic because it can make us feel very unsafe, igniting our fight or flight response.

This can be held in strong memories which are distressing and in the body as tension and ongoing pain. If this is the case, accessing professional support to process these pain memories can help a lot. Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing is a valuable psychological approach for this.

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Conclusion:

PGP is common which makes the lack of awareness about it surprising. Things are improving though, and many NHS Trusts offer support. This does tend to focus on the physical symptoms and, like any condition that causes pain, a broader more holistic approach is needed which includes the mental health component. If you believe you are experiencing PGP, do not understate it or allow anyone else to.

We know the impact it can have on women, particularly at a time when women can feel vulnerable already. We also know it needs to be treated. Ask your doctor and midwife for advice, if they cannot help, then perhaps seek a second opinion. Do request a referral for manual treatment and mental health support. If you are still struggling once your baby is born, seek further treatment and support until you feel better. Importantly, have compassion for yourself and do not try to struggle through it alone.

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