

Early signs and symptoms of pregnancy: Things you might notice before you start prenatal care

Could you be pregnant? Before you test, read this list of classic clues.

Are you pregnant? The proof is really in the pregnancy test. But you may suspect — or hope — that you're expecting, even before you miss a period, if you experience one or more of the following signs and symptoms of pregnancy. These early clues may begin in the first few weeks after conception.

Tender, swollen breasts or nipples

One of the first physical changes of pregnancy is a change in the way your breasts feel. They may feel tender, tingly or sore. Or they may feel fuller and heavier. As early as two weeks after conception, your breasts start to grow and change in preparation for producing milk. The primary cause of these changes is increased production of the hormones estrogen and progesterone. Changes in your breasts are often most dramatic when you're pregnant for the first time.

Fatigue

Many women feel wiped out during pregnancy, especially in the early stages. This may be nature's way of persuading moms-to-be to take extra naps, in preparation for the sleepless nights ahead. But there's also a physical reason for fatigue.

During the early weeks of pregnancy, your body is working hard — pumping out hormones and producing more blood to carry nutrients to your baby. To accommodate this increased blood flow, your heart pumps harder and faster. Plus, progesterone is a natural central nervous system depressant, so high levels of this hormone may make you sleepy. In addition, the possibility of pregnancy can bring about a range of feelings and concerns that may sap your energy and disturb sleep.

Slight bleeding or cramping

Some women experience a small amount of spotting or bleeding very early in pregnancy, about 10 to 14 days after fertilization. Known as implantation bleeding, it happens when the fertilized egg first attaches to the lining of the uterus. This type of bleeding is usually a bit earlier, spottier and lighter in color than a usual period and doesn't last long.

Many women also experience cramping very early in pregnancy as the uterus begins to enlarge. These cramps are similar to menstrual cramps.

Nausea with or without vomiting

Morning sickness is one of the telltale signs of early pregnancy. Most women feel some sickness around four to eight weeks of pregnancy, but the queasiness can begin as early as two weeks after conception.

Although nausea and vomiting during pregnancy is commonly called morning sickness, it can occur at any time of the day. It seems to stem from the rapidly rising levels of estrogen produced by the placenta and the fetus. These hormones cause the stomach to empty somewhat more slowly, which could be part of the problem. Pregnant women also have a heightened sense of smell, so a variety of odors — such as foods cooking, coffee, perfume or cigarette smoke — can trigger nausea.

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Food aversions or cravings

Turning up your nose at certain foods is often the first hint that you're pregnant. Even the smell of some foods may cause a wave of nausea in early pregnancy. One study suggests that pregnant women experience a unique aversion to coffee in the early weeks of pregnancy. Meat, dairy products and spicy foods are other common objects of repulsion.

Food cravings are common, too. Like most other symptoms of pregnancy, these food preferences can be chalked up to hormonal changes. Pregnant women typically find that their food tastes change somewhat, especially in the first trimester, when hormones have the strongest impact.

Frequent urination

Many pregnant women find themselves running to the bathroom more often than usual. During the first trimester of pregnancy, this is caused by the enlarging uterus pushing on your bladder.

Headaches

If you're pregnant, you may be troubled by frequent, mild headaches. Early in pregnancy, headaches may be the result of increased blood circulation caused by hormonal changes.

Constipation

Constipation is another common early indication of pregnancy. An increase in progesterone causes digestion to slow down, so food passes more slowly through the gastrointestinal tract, which can lead to constipation.

Mood swings

You're a no-nonsense kind of woman — so what's with this crying over Hallmark commercials? The flood of hormones in your body in early pregnancy can make you unusually emotional and weepy. Swings in your mood, from bliss to deep gloom, also are common, especially in the first trimester.

Faintness and dizziness

It's common for pregnant women to be lightheaded or dizzy. These sensations usually result from circulatory changes as your blood vessels dilate and your blood pressure drops. Early in pregnancy, faint feelings may also be triggered by low blood sugar.

Raised basal body temperature

Your basal body temperature (BBT) is your oral temperature when you first wake up in the morning. This temperature spikes slightly soon after ovulation and remains at that level until your next period. If you've been charting your BBT to determine when you ovulate, its continued elevation for more than two weeks may mean you're pregnant. In fact, BBT stays elevated throughout your pregnancy.

Are you *really* pregnant?

Unfortunately, these signs and symptoms aren't unique to pregnancy. Some can indicate that you're getting sick or that your period is about to start. And, conversely, you can be pregnant without ever experiencing these symptoms.

Still, if you notice any of the tip-offs on this list, make plans to take a home pregnancy test, especially if you're not keeping track of your menstrual cycle or if it varies widely from one month to the next. Also take extra good care of yourself. You just might be taking care for two.

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