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Release: March 11, 2008

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Carpal tunnel syndrome during pregnancy more common than women think

(MEADOWBROOK, PA) – Weight gain, morning sickness, fatigue – those are just a few of the things women are prepared for when they’re pregnant.

What many women don’t know, however, is that pregnancy can also bring on a painful condition that is common among assembly line workers and computer users.

“Carpal tunnel syndrome is often associated with jobs that require repetitive hand or wrist movements, but it is also common in women who are pregnant,” says Dr. Laurie Hirsh, an orthopedic hand and upper extremity surgeon with Holy Redeemer Hospital and Medical Center.

Put simply, the carpal tunnel is a bony “canal” that runs through a person’s wrist. The canal is formed by wrist bones that act as the “floor” of the canal and a thick, stout ligament that acts as the “roof.” Running through this canal are 10 flexor tendons and the median nerve, which gives sensation to the thumb and some of the fingers and is responsible for movement of a muscle at the base of the thumb.

The swelling and fluid retention that is common during pregnancy can increase the pressure in this relatively narrow and inflexible canal, compressing the median nerve. This increased pressure leads to diminished blood supply to the nerve and causes the symptoms of carpal tunnel, including numbness, tingling, pain or burning in the hands and fingers.

In pregnant women, symptoms may affect one or both hands and can appear at any time. However, they’re more likely to begin or worsen in the second half of pregnancy when women tend to retain more fluid.

To relieve the pain from carpal tunnel syndrome during pregnancy, Dr. Hirsh recommends a conservative approach starting with wrist splints or hand braces. If this does not help, the next step would be a localized injection of cortisone.

“Anti-inflammatory medications should be avoided during pregnancy so it’s best to consult with your doctor if the pain and numbness interfere with your daily routine,” says Dr. Hirsh. “The good news is, carpal tunnel symptoms usually go away for most women fairly quickly after they give birth and the swelling from pregnancy subsides. If symptoms persist, women should talk to their doctor or see a hand surgeon.”

While carpal tunnel syndrome typically fades after delivery, Dr. Hirsh says there is another condition that commonly crops up in women after they give birth.

“DeQuervain’s tendonitis is a painful condition that occurs when tendons to the thumb become inflamed,” she says. “It’s often caused when someone takes up a new, repetitive activity. New mothers are especially prone to this type of tendonitis because caring for a baby requires a lot of repetitive lifting and awkward hand positions.”

The primary symptoms of DeQuervain’s tendonitis include pain with wrist or thumb motion and tenderness directly over the tendons on the thumb-side of the wrist. To ease the pain, doctors typically recommend a special type of splint that immobilizes the thumb in addition to the wrist. This is in contrast to the over-the-counter wrist splints people use for carpal tunnel syndrome. Oral anti-inflammatory medication or a cortisone injection may also be recommended.

“These non-surgical treatments help reduce the swelling, which typically relieves pain over time,” says Dr. Hirsh. “In some cases, simply stopping the aggravating activities may allow the symptoms to go away on their own. For people with persistent symptoms, surgical release is a simple and effective solution.”

If you’re experiencing symptoms of carpal tunnel syndrome and would like to make an appointment with a physician, please call 1-800-818-4747. For more information about Holy Redeemer’s Maternity Center, please visit www.yourebeautifulbaby.com.

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