



Preeclampsia

High blood pressure during pregnancy

What is it?

Preeclampsia is a form of high blood pressure. It can affect pregnant women at any time in their pregnancy. However, it is more common in the second half of the pregnancy. It affects a relatively small number of pregnant women – around 5 to 8 percent. Sometimes it is called toxemia of pregnancy.

What causes it?

We don't know exactly what causes preeclampsia. It may happen because certain cells from the placenta affect blood vessels in the uterus. If this occurs, it may cause other complications. These can include narrowing of the lining of the mother's blood vessels, lack of oxygen to the placenta, and irregularities in the blood. Basically, it results in high blood pressure, often with other side effects, such as swelling.

Preeclampsia is more common in women who:

- Are pregnant for the first time when they are under the age of 20 or have a first pregnancy when they are over the age of 30
- Are pregnant with twins, triplets, or more
- Have another condition like heart disease, diabetes, or hypertension

What are the warning signs of preeclampsia?

Warning signs can occur before or at the same time that high blood pressure develops. They can include:

- Sudden weight gain of more than 2 pounds in one week
- Sudden swelling of the face or hands
- Protein in your urine
- Moderate or severe headaches that do not go away with acetaminophen (such as Tylenol)
- Blurred vision or other visual problems (like seeing spots)
- Pain in the upper abdomen that does not go away with antacids (such as Tums or Mylanta)

If you have any of these warning signs, it's important to call your doctor. If you're calling after regular business hours, on weekends, or on holidays, call Labor and Delivery. You may need to come to the hospital to have your blood pressure and urine checked. Also, be sure to come to all of your regular prenatal medical visits. In some cases, your doctor or other health care professional may order certain blood tests, which make it easier to tell whether or not you have preeclampsia.

What are the risks of the condition?

Preeclampsia can reduce blood flow to the placenta. The placenta gives your baby the nutrients it needs to grow and thrive. If the placenta does not provide enough nutrients, your baby may be born with low birth weight or have other problems.

Serious complications for the mother are rare, but can include convulsions or seizures. This is known as eclampsia. Very rarely, there is a risk that the baby, or even the baby and the mother, could die. Fortunately, preeclampsia is usually found early in women who get regular prenatal care, so most problems can be prevented.

How can I prevent preeclampsia?

You can't prevent preeclampsia. But, with regular check-ups, we can find it early and manage it better. To help manage high blood pressure, it's important to eat a healthy diet and drink at least eight glasses of liquid every day during your pregnancy. Avoid drinking tea, coffee, or soft drinks and do not smoke. You should also get plenty of rest.

What if I develop preeclampsia?

If you develop high blood pressure, your doctor or other health care professional will ask you to take extra precautions to prevent complications from preeclampsia. You may be advised to get bed rest and told to lie on your side, not on your back. If you work, your health care professional may advise you to cut back your hours or even stop working.

If these steps don't lower your blood pressure, you may have to be admitted to the hospital for more complete rest, closer observation, and possibly early delivery.

The only true cure for preeclampsia is birth. Labor may be induced 1 or 2 weeks before your due date. In rare cases, if the pregnancy is not going well, labor may be started even earlier.

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For additional health information you can trust

- Connect to our Web site at kp.org to access health and drug encyclopedias, interactive programs, health classes, and much more.
- Visit the American College of Obstetricians & Gynecologists: www.acog.org
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, and other resources.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor.