Itching in Pregnancy

Itching in pregnancy has been dismissed as an irritating and minor side effect of pregnancy. However, this is far from the case as women who experience itching in pregnancy often are quite distressed and even sleep deprived by the condition. Midwife Shea Caplice looks at what itching in pregnancy means and what to do about it.

The skin undergoes many changes during pregnancy and heat rashes and itching are the most common of the skin complaints. The extra blood volume your body produces during pregnancy, the increased body heat and the hormonal changes generally cause the itching. If your skin is dry you may be more susceptible to itchy skin particularly in the colder months. As your pregnancy progresses the stretching of your skin in response to your growing baby can also aggravate itchiness. Rashes may also be due to allergies, eczema or fungal infections.

Some women develop an itchy red rash over their abdomens in the second half of pregnancy, usually after 32 weeks. This is a common condition in pregnancy called pruritic (itchy) urticarial (swellings like hives) papules (red pimples) and plaques (irritable flakes) of pregnancy (PUPPP for short). It usually shows up first around the stretch marks on the belly and then spreads to the thighs, buttocks, and occasionally the arms. The rash does not have harmful effects for you and your baby and the actual cause of it is not known but the itch can drive you crazy! Your doctor or midwife will want to see you to make sure the rash has not been caused by anything else and will likely prescribe a topical ointment to give you some relief. For most women PUPPP should disappear soon after the birth and the baby is not affected. It seldom reoccurs in subsequent pregnancies.

Relentless itchiness in the last half of pregnancy can be a sign of intrahepatic cholestasis of pregnancy, a liver problem that affects around 1-2 percent of pregnant women and may be cause of concern for your baby. If your mother had the condition in pregnancy then you have an increased chance of getting it yourself. The cause of cholestasis is not clearly understood but the itching is thought to be due to a decreased break down of bile acids in the liver leading to a collection of excessive bile acids in the skin. The itching of the skin can be quite severe. The most significant feature of itching due to cholestasis is that it is not associated with a rash but you may end up with areas of inflamed and irritated skin where you have been scratching a lot. The itch is typically over the palms of the hands and the soles of the feet but some women describe all over itching. With any severe itching in pregnancy it is important to rule out cholestasis so you need to consult with your Doctor or Midwife as soon as possible. If necessary your caregiver will organise for you to have blood tests to check the function of your liver and to measure the level of bile salts in your blood. If cholestasis is confirmed drug therapy may be used to try and reduce the discomfort of the
itching. Depending on your health, the gestation of your pregnancy and your baby's condition, you may be induced before your estimated due date. The problem generally goes away after you have your baby, though it is possible for it to reappear in your next pregnancy.

What can you do about the itch?
The main advice is to keep cool both physically and mentally.
• Try to avoid overheating your body, as this will intensify the itching.
• Wear light cotton clothing.
• Cold compresses are helpful and having warm rather than hot baths and showers.
• Try oatmeal in your bath (you can buy pre-mixed oatmeal bath preparations at chemists or put some oats in an old stocking and attach it to your tap and run the water through it) or try adding a few drops of lavender or ti tree oil to the bath water.
• Use mild soaps and be sure to rinse off well and dry yourself gently.
• Try using sorbolene and glycerine cream instead of scented moisturisers and soaps.
• Applying lotions or ointments to your skin such as calamine lotion, calendula or paw paw ointment.
• Yoga, tai chi or relaxation techniques are helpful as stress, anxiety and tension can make your skin problem worse. Relaxation techniques are a great preparation for labour as well!

Medical Treatments
If your itch becomes unbearable you may need to be prescribed antihistamines. Oral steroids are used in severe cases but not often and are certainly actively avoided.

Laura is 32 weeks pregnant and was diagnosed with PUPPS last week. I have been depressed because I have not been sleeping much and this rash is really getting me down. I have been slathering myself with all sorts of lotions and creams but what I have found most effective is keeping my body from overheating particular at night in bed. I have been having a coolish bath before I go to bed and wearing light cotton clothing. Also I have been wearing cotton gloves to bed to stop my nails doing more damage when I am scratching in my sleep. Now I can’t wait to have the baby so I can stop itching!

Resources:
www.birth.com
www.babycenter.com
www.britishlivertrust.org.uk