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How do I find a good physiotherapist?

Our experience of talking and listening to women with SPD has shown that one of the best options for treatment is physiotherapy. We often suggest that women try to find a good physiotherapist, the question is – how do you find one? And how do you know if they are any good?

First of all you need to find a physiotherapist who understands SPD. All too often SPD is dismissed as “part of the normal aches and pains of pregnancy” and is seen as something that has to be endured during pregnancy but will resolve itself naturally after the baby has been born. For the vast majority of women with SPD this is not the case! SPD is a significant obstetric problem and most women will find appropriate physiotherapy helpful.

Some women with SPD pain have definite structural problems with their spine and pelvis, such as a misaligned symphysis pubis joint, or increased or decreased movement in one of the hips or the sacroiliac joint (joint at the back of the pelvis). As the pelvis is a closed ring of bone any problem with one joint will affect the function of all the others. Some women have no major structural problems but the changes brought about by pregnancy have altered the normal movements of the pelvis, resulting in pain and reduced mobility.

Any treatment should begin with a thorough assessment of how your pelvis functions – the therapist should take a history of your symptoms and should look for themselves how your spine and pelvis move. This will involve moving limbs and pressing on the joints of the pelvis. (This can be painful). From this assessment the therapist will decide the best course of treatment for you – often a combination of “hands-on” manual treatment, to correct the changes in the joints, and stability exercises to maintain optimal control of the pelvis via the muscles. If your therapist tells you that nothing can be done you should ask for a second opinion or look elsewhere for help.

Traditionally physiotherapists did not give manual treatment to pregnant women with SPD, partly because it was assumed that SPD was caused by pregnancy hormones and therefore would not go away until the baby was delivered and partly because of a general unease from medical professionals about treating pregnant women. It was usual for physiotherapist to offer sympathy, support belts and crutches but not much else. More recently physiotherapist have begun to change their opinion and have started to give hands-on manual treatment as they would to non-pregnant people i.e. they physically touch you and pull and push your joints into different positions. The effects of pregnancy such as the change in the centre of gravity, changes in posture, the weight of the baby and increased ligament laxity mean that a “cure” is not always possible, as the contributing factors cannot be removed. However, many women with SPD have responded well to such treatment during pregnancy. Some women, particularly those who sought treatment quickly after the onset of symptoms, report no further pain or problems. Many others report a lessening of symptoms, with reduced pain and increased mobility and function. Even when the symptoms do not go away, the condition can be managed and prevented from worsening. Some women need regular hands-on treatment as the corrections cannot be maintained because of lax ligaments and the baby’s weight. Others need only the occasional session.

As well as manual therapy you may be offered a support belt to hold your pelvic joints in a stable position. This can reduce your pain although it is important that your pelvis is correctly aligned before you wear it. If not it will make your pain worse rather than better.

The quality of physiotherapy varies widely from area to area, from hospital to hospital and even within hospitals themselves. (You can find that one member of the team is fantastic whilst another is very unsupportive and unhelpful!). You can access physiotherapy services through the NHS or alternatively you can use a private physiotherapist. It doesn’t necessarily follow that private physiotherapy is always better than that offered by the NHS; some NHS physios are excellent and some private ones are not so good. Your GP or midwife can refer you to an obstetric physiotherapist although you may have to wait a while for an appointment. If you chose to see a private

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physiotherapist you should make sure that they are familiar with treating pelvises. It is not necessary to find a specialist obstetric physiotherapist, many sports injury physiotherapist can treat SPD effectively as it is a common rugby injury although you may have to talk them into treating a pregnant woman. Prices vary around the country but you can expect to pay about £30 - £40 per 45 minute session. A good starting point to finding a good therapist is word of mouth – speak to others who have had similar problems and see if they can recommend anyone. Alternatively you could ask for recommendations from your local sports injury clinic or look in the Yellow Pages. Once you have found a therapist you can telephone and ask if they have experience of SPD and how they would propose to treat you. As already stated, you should expect to have a thorough manual assessment before any treatment is offered. You should be wary of therapists who only talk to you – they need to touch you to really find out what is going on. Some women find that their symptoms worsen slightly after a physiotherapy session. The movements of the joints can stir things up a bit but this is usually temporary and should settle within a day or so. Everyone is different and so is everyone's experience of SPD and physiotherapy. However, as a general rule you should expect to feel some improvement within a few sessions, even if this improvement is very gradual. For example, you may be able to walk slightly further or sit for a while without pain. At the very least you should expect that your symptoms remain stable and do not worsen – this is particularly true of post-natal women. If, after several sessions of treatment, you find that you are not making any progress, it might be worth asking your physio to reassess you or looking for alternative treatment.

At the Pelvic Partnership we have a policy of not suggesting individual therapists unless we have had a personal recommendations from a member. We do not pass on the details of therapists who contact us looking for work. So, if you find someone fantastic and you think others would benefit from their treatment, please do let us know.

We would be very interested to hear your experiences of physiotherapy, both good and bad, for a future newsletter article. We would also like to hear about any other therapies you have found helpful, please write to: The Pelvic Partnership, 26 Manor Green, Harwell, Oxon, OX11 0DQ or the email address below. Thank you.

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