



Preeclampsia

High blood pressure during pregnancy

What is it?

Preeclampsia is a form of high blood pressure that sometimes occurs during pregnancy. It can affect women after 20 weeks of pregnancy, and is more common towards the end 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, any of these can result in high blood pressure, often with other side effects, such as protein in the urine and swelling in the face, legs, feet and hands.

Preeclampsia is more common in women who:

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

What are the warning signs?

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 the 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. At these visits, 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?

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 get enough blood, your baby will not get enough nutrients and 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 with regular prenatal visits, so most serious complications can be prevented.

How can I prevent it?

You can't prevent the development of preeclampsia, but with regular check-ups, we can find it early and manage it better. It helps to stay healthy in pregnancy by maintaining a healthy diet and drinking at least eight glasses of liquid every day. Avoid drinking tea, coffee, and 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. If you work, your health care professional may advise you to cut back your hours or even stop working.

In some cases, you may be admitted to the hospital for rest, closer observation, and possibly early delivery.

The only true cure for preeclampsia is delivery. 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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Additional resources

- Visit your doctor's home page at kp.org/mydoctor to use online health tools, view your Preventive Services reminders, check most lab results, and much more.
- Visit the American College of Obstetricians & Gynecologists website: www.acog.org
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, and other resources.
- Your health and your pregnancy can be seriously affected by violence or abuse. If you are hit, hurt or threatened by a partner or spouse, there is help. Call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233 or connect to ndvh.org.

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.