

Explaining Pre-eclampsia

The Royal Women's Hospital Fact Sheet / www.thewomens.org.au



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Pre-eclampsia

- Most common serious medical complication of pregnancy.
- Causes a number of problems for both mother and baby.
- Symptoms are not always obvious.
- Never miss an antenatal appointment because these checkups can pick up early signs of pre-eclampsia.

Explaining pre-eclampsia

Pre-eclampsia is an illness that occurs during or immediately after pregnancy. It can affect both the mother and the baby. The cause of pre-eclampsia is not clear. It can develop very quickly. The main features are high blood pressure and the presence of protein in the urine.

While swelling, weight gain and headaches can be present in any pregnancy, they can also be warning signs that you have pre-eclampsia, especially if the symptoms develop suddenly. Sudden blurred vision is also a symptom. You can also develop pre-eclampsia without experiencing any symptoms at all.

One in ten pregnancies will be affected by pre-eclampsia. It usually occurs in the second half of pregnancy and can sometimes develop in the days after the baby is born. It is more common in first pregnancies.

How mother and baby are affected

A mother can develop problems with her circulation, causing damage to the placenta. This shows up as high blood pressure, protein in the urine and swelling.

For most women the illness remains mild but in some cases it can become serious. It can also affect other parts of the body such as the liver and the blood clotting system (HELLP Syndrome) and can also lead to convulsions (Eclampsia).

Pre-eclampsia can get worse very quickly which is dangerous for both mother and baby.

The poor blood supply from the mother to the placenta limits the baby's supply of nutrients and oxygen. This can reduce the baby's ability to grow.

Cure/Treatments

If you remain pregnant, drugs may be used to control your blood pressure and prevent convulsions.

If your pre-eclampsia becomes severe, the cure is to deliver the baby and placenta.

If this occurs early in the second half of pregnancy it puts baby at risk of complications of extreme prematurity.

Subsequent pregnancies

The risk of pre-eclampsia recurring in subsequent pregnancies is usually small. This risk is increased however in women with chronic medical disorders such as essential hypertension (high blood pressure), kidney disease, diabetes, or lupus.

The following symptoms could possibly indicate pre-eclampsia:

- persistent headaches that are unrelieved by over the counter medications
- blurred vision
- significant or sudden swelling of hands, face or feet.

Further information

For general health information you can contact the Women's Health Information Centre at the Royal Women's Hospital on (03) 8345 3045 or email whic@thewomens.org.au

You can also visit the Women's website www.thewomens.org.au

For emergency information contact the Women's Emergency Department on (03) 8345 3636

This brochure was produced in partnership with Australian Action on Pre-eclampsia (AAPEC).

AAPEC is a voluntary organisation set up to provide support and information to families who have suffered from pre-eclampsia.

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For a pre-eclampsia info pack email your details to: info@aapec.org.au

AAPEC website enquiries www.aapec.org.au

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