

Kim Martin, busy mother of two

Early one morning I woke up with excruciating back pain. I had no idea what was going on. Three months earlier I had given birth to a healthy baby girl with no complications, feeling back to normal within a week. As a busy mother of two I ignored the severe pain and continued on with life as best I could. My son Aiden was two at the time and I had three month old Addison, so stopping life wasn't really an option.

Eventually I went to see my GP. I was unsatisfied with the diagnosis of 'muscle pain from breastfeeding'. I knew it was something more so I sought a second opinion and disappointingly I received the same diagnosis. I regret not being firmer with the medical professionals and insisting that it was not just muscle pain.

My pain continued until it became unbearable and my stomach began to bloat resulting in hospitalisation. A consultant at the hospital noticed a curve in my back and ordered x-rays that showed three crush fractures in my spine. It was recommended I be investigated for osteoporosis and I was referred to an orthopaedic surgeon. MRI and CT scans were conducted and with them returning clear, I finally went to an endocrinologist. A bone scan and blood tests found I have pregnancy associated osteoporosis. My diagnosis occurred three months after I experienced the first pain.

It was a good 18 months before I started to feel normal, I think it takes so long because kids don't just look after themselves and the lifting never stops... into the bath, out of the bath, into the car seat, changing nappies, you can't just stop doing these things to give your body the rest it needs. We have always been a fit and healthy family so it was a shock that something like this could happen to me.

I will always be fearful of fracturing again because the initial pain was so severe. The thought of going through that again is very upsetting.



What is pregnancy associated osteoporosis?

Pregnancy associated osteoporosis is a rare condition where a woman's bones break easily during pregnancy or in the weeks after giving birth. These breaks normally occur in the spine or hip.

Why do some women get it and not others?

It is still unclear why some women are more susceptible. It's possible they already had low bone density before the pregnancy. Pregnancy does place greater demand on the skeleton's calcium bank. Inadequate calcium and vitamin D levels during pregnancy may lead to the body leeching calcium from the bones, leading to a weakening of the skeleton.

How is it diagnosed?

This condition is usually not diagnosed until after the baby is born as osteoporosis generally doesn't have any symptoms until a fracture occurs. Warning signs prior to giving birth may include: back pain and loss of height, however with back pain being common in pregnancy, your doctor might not suspect osteoporosis. Even after the baby is born, it may take some time to be diagnosed, as the pain associated with the fracture/s may be mistaken for post-pregnancy and labour aches.

Breast feeding

Breast feeding is a common concern for those diagnosed. It's important you speak to your doctor about it as each individual's medical history is different.

Recovery

Generally fractures that occur during or after pregnancy will heal without much intervention however there are always exceptions.

The recovery process is long and requires a lot of rest to heal the fractures and regain bone strength. Spinal bones that have been broken often do not return to their original shape when healed and this can cause ongoing pain.

When asked how her day-to-day life is affected by the condition Kim said "I love being active with my kids but I need to be mindful of even the smallest things in case I trip or fall. Addison loves going on swings but the standing and pushing movement creates pain. I can't carry my kids or pick them up and cuddle them for fear of another fracture."

Emotional pain

People often neglect to take into account the emotional and mental struggles associated with the condition. Apart from the pain, Kim said one of the hardest things for her was feeling like she was being judged by other people for example: when she was out and about and couldn't pick up her toddler when he was having a tantrum. "It's not just the physical pain that makes it hard" said Kim, "Because there aren't many physical signs of the disease you get to the point where you feel depressed because it feels like people don't care, so you carry on and put a front up to protect your own feelings. Sometimes I thought if I only had a broken arm in a cast... people might understand more."

Getting back into exercise

If you have had a spinal fracture, doing special exercises after you baby is born can help to strengthen your back and reduce pain. Exercise will help you recover from your fracture but it's important to be cautious and get expert advice. It's also important to realise that your body has gone through a trauma, and that you will need plenty of support and assistance.

After being diagnosed with osteoporosis, Kim was given some information to read about exercises she should be doing but found most of it was geared towards older people and by the time she had a chance to do them she was already in pain from running around after the kids all day.

Two years after her fractures Kim is starting to get back into exercise. She is working with a physiotherapist who specialises in osteoporosis and spinal fractures, "They have helped me with a weights program that takes away any pressure on my spine and I have now joined a gym." It's taking time but Kim is gradually building up her confidence with exercise again.

Can I have another baby?

Most women who have suffered pregnancy associated osteoporosis do go on to have subsequent pregnancies and births that are trouble-free but it's important you discuss your personal risks with your GP. Sometimes the trauma of experiencing this condition once, makes couples too scared to try again. "My husband and I did want more kids but the thought of having anymore fractures terrifies me, emotionally I couldn't cope and I am not sure if I trust my body physically either" said Kim.

Support

Support from loved ones and external parties is essential. Four months ago Kim found a Facebook support group* that she says has been a "Breath of fresh air."

There are nearly 50 members in the group and one of the most common concerns among its members is breast-feeding. Other concerns raised in the group relate to not being able to do different activities with the kids, from comforting them, to going on water slides or amusement park rides, and just balancing everyday life whilst managing pain levels.

Kim says "I do feel lucky as some of the women have suffered a lot more than me but they have told me I give them hope and I feel blessed to be able to run again. It's important to me to share my story, so that people know that osteoporosis is not just for the elderly."

"My kids are amazing and we tell them I have a virus in my back called osteoporosis and that they need to be gentle with me. Addison has just learnt to say it (osteoporosis), which is quite cute."

* If you would like to join the support group please email: admin@osteoporosis.org.au

Conclusion

If you fracture during or after pregnancy we encourage you to ask your doctor to check you for osteoporosis.

Resources:

[Pregnancy and Osteoporosis](#)

Toll-free helpline: 1800 242 141