

WORKING MOTHER

The Top 8 Health Conditions That Affect Working Moms

The demands of work and motherhood have a real impact on your body, but these fixes can help.

By RACHEL RABKIN PEACHMAN APRIL 14, 2017

Almost 70 percent of mothers are now part of the U.S. workforce, and yet we're still taking on the majority of family caregiving demands and the "mental labor" for the home, too. Beyond taking an undue toll on working mothers' stress levels, this imbalance can lead to a few physical ailments. If you're dealing with these conditions, rest assured there are ways to get relief. Check out our expert solutions from physicians and physical therapists who've not only treated patients but also, as working mothers, have been there, themselves.

Back Pain

The problem: Carrying young kids coupled with long hours sitting at a desk (or with a phone lodged between your ear and shoulder) can lead to muscle tension in the neck, back and shoulders, and disc degeneration.

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Lower your risk: “Move as much as you can,” says Marianne Ryan, a physical therapist, mother and author of *Baby Bod: Turn Flab to Fab in 12 Weeks Flat*. “It’s not only important to avoid the most common slouching positions but also to alternate between several different body positions throughout the day.” So get up every hour and walk around (set an alarm as a reminder), and do neck and shoulder rolls.

Manage it at work: To stretch your upper back from your chair, raise your arms and link your hands together behind your neck. Elbows pointing out, gently arch backwards five times feeling the stretch in your upper body.

Headaches

The problem: “Headaches can be triggered by inadequate sleep, stress and lack of hydration, which all affect many working mothers,” says Dawne Kort, M.D., an emergency medicine physician at CityMD urgent care clinics in New York.

Lower your risk: Wear a tech device or use an app to track your water intake and sleep to see if you’re falling short. “I’ve been a migraine sufferer since I was 12, and it wasn’t until I started tracking that I realized I wasn’t drinking enough water,” explains Dr. Kort. “Since I’ve increased my hydration, my incidence of migraines has dramatically decreased.” (The National Institutes of Health recommends women consume about 91 oz of water daily through beverages and food depending on your size.) As for getting more sleep, coordinate with your spouse to give each of you nights off of kid duty to sleep without interruption.

Manage it at work: When headaches strike, gently massage your temples at your desk, says Dr. Kort. Or if you can, break for a few minutes to find a quiet spot away from ringing phones or other loud noises, which can be triggering.

IBS

The problem: “We see a lot of working moms with gastrointestinal complaints like constipation and diarrhea, which can be due to dehydration, poor eating habits and stress,” says Dr. Kort. You might have irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), but “see a gastroenterologist to rule out ulcers and other causes,” adds Dr. Kort.

Lower your risk: Dr. Kort recommends daily probiotics for gut health, and consuming plenty of fiber—from fruits, vegetables and whole grains—to keep your digestive tract running smoothly. And minimize stress. One recent study published by researchers at Vanderbilt found that psychological therapies can lessen IBS symptoms.

Manage it at work: Beyond drinking water throughout the day, eating whole foods, and steering clear of irritants like caffeine, fit in a few minutes of relaxation. “A quick workout or phone call with a friend can be instrumental in alleviating tension,” says Dr. Kort.

Anxiety

The problem: “I see many working mothers in a state of overwhelm,” says Ginnie Love, Ph.D., a mom of two grown daughters and a holistic psychotherapist in Miami. “We’re always running, multitasking and ‘doing,’ which causes our nervous system to be in fight-or-flight mode. We spend very little time in a state during which the body is able to rest and digest.” Too much of this can make us feel endlessly frazzled and stressed.

Lower your risk: “Even though working and taking care of children leaves little time for self-care, figure out what nurtures you and puts you in a rejuvenating state, and do that each day,” says Dr. Love. “It might be socializing with a friend or letting your kids run around in the yard (rather than trying to squeeze in one more activity) so you have time to sit with a cup of tea.” And if running to the gym feels like another stressor, that doesn’t qualify as downtime.

Manage it at work: Make a list of what matters, and put limits on the rest. Revisit that list frequently to make sure you’re prioritizing yourself.

Blocked milk ducts and mastitis

The problem: It’s tough for nursing moms to leave their shifts or meetings to pump. But if breasts are not emptied regularly it can cause engorgement, clogged milk ducts and mastitis, an infection that requires antibiotics.

Lower your risk: Tell your manager that you need to pump at specific times each day, framing it as a health issue. If your boss balks, summon a pro. “I’ve written doctor’s notes for patients saying they need to nurse on a regular schedule,” says Dr. Kort.

Manage it at work: Microwave a wet cloth and place it on the aching breast. Then, before you pump, massage around the blockage. Once milk starts draining, massage around the nipple while pumping to get milk flowing. (Here’s a handy tutorial.)

Pelvic Pain

The problem: Research shows that pelvic and genital pain can last a year postpartum for more than a third of women. “The ligaments and connective tissue that stretched for childbirth often stay loose long after delivery, which can lead to instability and pain—and this becomes even more uncomfortable when you’re sitting at a desk for many hours,” says Ryan.

Lower your risk: Spend 10 minutes each day doing pelvic floor contractions (aka Kegel exercises) and abdominal exercises to strengthen the muscles in those areas.

Manage it at work: Put a gel pad on your chair to lessen the pressure on your pelvic region while sitting.

Carpal tunnel syndrome

The problem: “Connective tissue loosening can affect the entire body—not just the pelvic floor—and this makes mothers, especially those nursing, more prone to injuries from repetitive movements,” like typing, says Ryan.

Lower your risk: Avoid resting your wrists on the keyboard while typing because this requires you to flex your wrists up, which can pinch the nerve in the carpal tunnel area. Instead, elevate your wrists above the keyboard with a pad.

Manage it at work: Wear a brace that keeps your wrist in a neutral position while typing—and while holding the baby or sleeping.

Nutrient Depletion

The problem: Working moms frequently have deficiencies in iron and B12, which lead to fatigue. For nursing working moms, this depletion can be even more severe.

Lower your risk: “If you don’t have time to improve your diet, at least take a multivitamin with iron every day,” says Dr. Kort.

Manage it at work: Start your day with a mega-dose of nutrients by blending up a daily fruit and vegetable smoothie that you can grab and take to go.

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