

St. Elizabeth's Patient Spotlight: Treating Pain after Childbirth

After nine months of carrying a baby – and multiply that by two, three or even more with multiple pregnancies – it may be hard to remember what your body looked or felt like before giving birth. For many women, post-partum pain associated with pregnancy, labor and delivery are often handled with a "grin and bear it" attitude.

For Anne Marie D., a 40-year-old mother of three from Dedham, Massachusetts, it was a few years after the birth of her third child in 2012 that she realized it was time to escalate her efforts to manage the chronic pain she was experiencing.

"With three girls and my youngest not yet three years old, I'm busy and not able to restrict my movements to minimize the pain I was feeling throughout the core of my body. I realized that laying down helped significantly, but that isn't feasible given my daily demands," says Anne Marie.

"I have a long-term relationship with my chiropractor who was helping me manage right hip pain last summer and a pulsing, almost like the strong fluttering that I experienced during pregnancy, in my pelvic area," explains Anne-Marie. "The hip was painful and the pulsing was distracting. He was treating me for these issues until right before the Christmas holidays when I started experiencing a painful burning in the vaginal area that I assumed was a yeast infection."

Combined with the hip pain and pelvic pulsing and burning, she felt it was time to see her OB/GYN. "My regular OB/GYN at St. Elizabeth's had retired so I called my local area hospital and was told a practitioner would not be available to see me until February, at the earliest," Anne Marie says. "Given this, I called St. Elizabeth's to find a new OB/GYN because I had always received such great care there in the past. Within 24 hours, I had an appointment with nurse-midwife Kathryn Carr, CNM, MSN at St. Elizabeth's St. Margaret's Center for Women and Infants."

Carr examined Anne Marie before the Christmas holiday and immediately started her on a testing and medication regimen to rule out a yeast infection and other possible hormonal, bacterial or viral concerns.

"Kathryn worked closely with me over the holidays," says Anne Marie. "She didn't want me to linger with symptoms or progress through a treatment plan that was not working. I felt her patient care for me went the extra mile that you don't often experience in healthcare."

After ruling out a yeast infection and other illnesses, Carr brought Anne Marie back for re-evaluation and a follow-up examination. Conveniently, St. Elizabeth's urogynecologist Sonia Adams, MD, was available for consultation on that day. She quickly assessed that the problem was muscular and connected to pelvic floor muscular strain and spasm. Adams referred Anne Marie to the St. Elizabeth's Pelvic Floor Therapy program, an outpatient clinic in Brighton, Massachusetts, led by Abha Kolman, PT, DPT.

"The benefit of St. Elizabeth's OB/GYN care is that our services are centrally located and our practitioners are close enough that we can frequently offer patients an immediate specialist visit without the patient having to make an appointment, go home, and come back at a later date," says Isabel Morais, MD, FACOG, chair of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology at St. Elizabeth's. "Anne Marie is a perfect example of how we are able to make the patient experience as convenient as possible and offer rapid access to specialists and specialized follow-up care."

In Kolman's experience, it is common for women to suffer with pain after childbirth and not seek help. "I see patients like Anne Marie who ignore their own symptoms because they are busy taking care of their baby or babies," says Kolman. "If you are at your six- to eight-week post-partum check-up, or even after, and are experiencing abdominal pain, pelvic pain, pain with intercourse, incontinence, constipation, anything really, talk to your OB/GYN or nurse-midwife about it. You shouldn't have to accept this as your new normal."



Photo by Maureen Sargent, "Maureen Sargent Photography."

For Anne Marie, Kolman prescribed an exercise and pelvic floor biofeedback regimen to address the burning, pain and pulsing she was still feeling. "I would not have thought my pain was muscular," says Anne Marie. "It really felt like an infection with the burning."

According to Kolman, most patients don't realize how extensive and intricate the muscles of the pelvic floor are and how they connect to many other major muscles. The pelvic floor transmits forces between the upper and lower body, and plays an integral role in pelvic organ support, sphincter activity and sexual function. Injury or damage to one area through either pregnancy or childbirth can cause a ripple effect that can be extensive and painful. In Anne Marie's case, her pain was originating because muscles she couldn't see were injured and tight.

"The hip pain is from her hip flexors, which are tied to the pelvic floor musculature. This is similar to patients with abdominal pain which is triggered by damage or injury to the pelvic floor," explains Kolman. "With specialized physical therapy, we can go inside the body with heat and biofeedback to improve body mechanics and functional mobility and essentially minimize or eliminate the pain."

After several sessions of pelvic floor physical therapy, Anne Marie has experienced a significant lessening of pain and, according to Kolman, "the goal is to get her independent with a home exercise program to improve her functional mobility."

"I am much more body conscious now," says Anne Marie. "Abha has really helped me understand my body at a whole different level. I never realized how many muscles are working inside the core of the body and how these muscles can be treated at home to relieve strain and tension. As a result of Abha's care, I am learning exercises and breathing techniques to keep the pelvic area relaxed. I'm so thankful that I addressed this and really got to the root of my pain. It's such a relief to not have this be constantly in the background when I'm spending time with my family."

If you are experiencing pain after childbirth, talk with your OB/GYN. If you need an appointment with an OB/GYN, call our personalized DoctorFinder service at 800-488-5959.

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