



Preeclampsia

(pronounced "pre-ee-clamp-see-ah")

What is preeclampsia? Preeclampsia is a disease that occurs only in pregnant women, usually during the last four or five months of pregnancy. It is also called toxemia or pregnancy-induced hypertension (PIH). Preeclampsia can range in severity from mild to extremely serious. It can appear suddenly at any time during pregnancy. It can start out mild, and gradually become severe. It can also suddenly go away.

Preeclampsia is caused by damage to the lining of the blood vessels. This damage starts a chain reaction of events at the cellular level. Preeclampsia can negatively affect the mother's heart, kidneys, liver, lungs, and brain, and may eventually harm the unborn baby too.

What are the signs of preeclampsia? This disease has three signs: high blood pressure, swelling, and a large amount of protein in the urine. Women with just one or two of these problems may not have preeclampsia.

- High blood pressure. High blood pressure is like an ongoing vasospasm that keeps the vessels constricted, raising the pressure of the blood. Preeclampsia is considered mild when blood pressure is in the range of 140/90. With severe preeclampsia, blood pressure rises to 150/110 or higher.
- Swelling. The hands, feet, eyelids, legs, and face may swell. Internal swelling can also occur. Swelling happens because high blood pressure damages the blood vessels to the point that they "leak" fluid. The accumulated fluid causes the swelling.
- Protein in the urine. Vasospasms damage the kidneys. The damaged kidneys "leak" protein into the urine. This upsets the balance of water in the body, contributing to the swelling throughout the body.

Women with preeclampsia may experience any of these symptoms:

Rapid heartbeat
Severe headaches

Excessive vomiting
Swelling of hands and feet

Abdominal or chest pain
Blood in the urine

Dizziness
Little or no urine

Drowsiness
Fever

Double or blurred vision
Ringing in the ears

Preeclampsia can be hard to diagnose because it can look like so many other conditions. That's why it is known as the "Great Masquerader." Your doctor will run tests and may ask you many questions in order to figure out if you have preeclampsia. The more you know about preeclampsia, the easier it will be for you to provide your doctor with helpful information.

Who gets preeclampsia? Between 5-10% of all pregnant women get preeclampsia. Any expectant mom can get preeclampsia. Some of the risk factors are now known, however. Women with a personal or family history of preeclampsia are at risk. Other women more likely to get preeclampsia include those who are:

- Having their first baby
- Having another baby with a new partner
- African-American or Native American
- Under age 20 or over age 35
- Having twins or triplets
- Already coping with lupus, diabetes, or chronic high blood pressure
- Carrying a baby with a chromosomal abnormality

What causes preeclampsia? While there are many theories, no one is sure why preeclampsia occurs. This makes it hard to prevent and impossible to accurately predict who will get it.

What should I do if I have symptoms of preeclampsia? Never ignore the symptoms of preeclampsia. Your health and your baby's health are too important to risk. If you notice any of the symptoms listed above, call your doctor right away. If you are at work, don't wait until your workday is over.

It is important to seek medical help as soon as possible because preeclampsia can become serious quickly. High blood pressure can cause problems with vision. The high blood pressure pushes on the retina and can cause it to detach. In the worst case, this can cause blindness. High blood pressure can also cause a stroke or a seizure. Swelling in the brain can also cause a seizure. After a seizure, the disease is no longer called preeclampsia, but has become eclampsia. Eclampsia is very serious, even potentially deadly, for both the mother and the unborn baby.

M3-2/RL7.0