

+ Plus-Size

If you're overweight, you've probably heard about the effect of those pounds on your health for years. But being plus-sized doesn't mean you can't have a wonderful, healthy pregnancy and a beautiful, healthy baby — what you need is good information and medical care.

Find a Size-Friendly Caregiver

The first thing you can do to ensure that you will feel good about your pregnancy and stay healthy is find a caregiver who is accepting of you and your body shape, and will work with you to help you have the healthiest possible pregnancy. Avoid anyone preachy, accusatory or who simply projects an aura of thinner-than-thou arrogance.

Ann Douglas, author of *The Mother of All Pregnancy Books* and herself a plus-size mother of four, says, "You want someone who will help you to set weight gain goals for yourself, but who won't make you feel like an unfit mother if you happen to gain an extra pound or two one month."

"Size-friendly caregivers give information about possible complications accurately but without judgment, and they work proactively with a woman on prevention without lecturing or shaming," says Pamela Vireday, a childbirth educator in Oregon. "They don't try to impose their agendas and opinions about size issues, but they do offer gentle advice if it is asked for." Vireday knows her subject matter well: she owns and operates Plus-Size-Pregnancy.org and serves as an advocate for expectant big beautiful women ("BBW").

Being size-wise doesn't end there, she says. These caregivers also need to have size-appropriate equipment. "They know that using a regular cuff falsely elevates blood pressure in people of size; they have large blood pressure cuffs and use them automatically. They have gowns that fit and appropriate scales, and go out of their way to help you be comfortable... And always do so respectfully and with caring."

Interview your doctor or midwife at your first appointment (or book a special interview appointment) and ask specific questions about his or her philosophy with regard to your current weight and your future weight gain. Such questions might include:

- Do you consider yourself sensitive to the needs and feelings of larger women?
- What kind of weight gain do you recommend for a large woman during pregnancy?
- Where is the scale located for weigh-ins?
- Does your office have larger-sized gowns and blood pressure cuffs? ▶▶

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"Some women are ashamed and don't want their caregivers to mention the issue at all. But in my experience, this hesitation to talk about it may hide a bias on the part of the caregiver that you may not find out about until it's too late to choose someone else," says Dawn Mantas, a doula (a trained labor and birth support person) in Royal Oak, Michigan. "The best thing I've found is to have an open dialogue with my caregiver, to be able to talk about what the real risks [of] being overweight [are] — but not to assume that they will occur."

If the prospective caregiver's answers make you uncomfortable, go elsewhere. Ask other plus-size moms for recommendations, or call obstetricians' offices and ask point blank if they have a size-friendly attitude toward large women.

Remember that part of your caregiver's job is to talk to you about your risks and health concerns. The news might not always be just what you want to hear, but your caregiver should not blame or scold you.

Don't be embarrassed by your weight or shape: doctors and midwives see bodies of all shapes and sizes all the time. You need to find a caregiver with whom you can be honest, one who will listen to your concerns and questions and treat you with the respect you deserve.

Says Vireday, "Most importantly, size-friendly caregivers expect normalcy. They know that their expectations and subtle messages often influence the course of pregnancy and birth, and that they have a strong responsibility for helping a woman birth as beautifully and as positively as possible, regardless of size."



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Health Concerns

You may worry that your weight will affect your chances for a healthy pregnancy. Remember: odds are, you'll have a healthy pregnancy and baby. However, plus-size moms are at a higher risk for some conditions, such as gestational diabetes, hypertension and preeclampsia.

"Obese women also develop high blood pressure more often than thinner women," says M. Kelly Shanahan, MD, FACOG, a practicing Ob/Gyn and author of *Your Over-35 Week-by-Week Pregnancy Guide*. "Blood pressure is checked every visit, as it should be in all pregnant women. If you're a large woman, make sure your blood pressure is taken with an appropriately-sized cuff — too small a cuff will lead to a falsely elevated reading."

Plus-size moms-to-be are at increased risk for gestational diabetes (GD), which can lead to a big baby. "Even without diabetes, larger women tend to have larger babies," notes Dr. Shanahan. "Large babies may mean more [risk of] cesarean section and more risk of injury to the baby during a vaginal birth." There's an increased risk of shoulder dystocia, too, in which the shoulders get stuck; this can cause nerve damage in the baby and vaginal tears in the mom. "Women who are obese should be screened for gestational diabetes in the first trimester; if this testing is normal, they should be tested again in the usual 24- to 28-week range." Controlling weight gain and monitoring the baby's size can help avoid GD.

The March of Dimes in its February 2002 report, "Nutrition Today Matters Tomorrow," reported that overweight women are at a 30-40 percent higher risk of delivering babies with birth defects. Don't panic — some of the risk can be reduced with folic acid supplements. Talk to your caregiver for more information.

Make sure your care provider discusses these conditions with you and monitors you for them. At the same time, remember that your caregiver monitors all pregnant moms for these conditions, and will do the same for you. Don't feel you are being singled out because of your weight.

Weight Gain and Pregnancy

One of the biggest misconceptions is that you shouldn't gain any weight during pregnancy if you are larger than average size. Don't believe it! "My doctor told me that a baby can't live off my fat, so I should eat," comments Lisa Peters of Manassas, Virginia.

Dr. Robert A. Hadden, assistant professor of clinical obstetrics and gynecology at Columbia University, agrees, "I would never recommend someone to diet during pregnancy."

However, that doesn't mean the typical weight gain of 25-35 pounds necessarily applies. When it comes to Hadden's patients, "If they are extremely overweight, I wouldn't have them gain more than 20 pounds."

In fact, a 1996 study reported in the medical journal *Obstetrics & Gynecology* found that when it comes to

plus-size moms, "the incidence of [pregnancy] complications was not associated with weight change." In other words, gaining little or no weight won't necessarily make you or your baby any healthier. "It's not healthy for a woman to aim for zero

weight gain during pregnancy," agrees Douglas. "Try not to beat yourself up if you exceed it, but, at the same time, don't give yourself carte blanche to gain 50 pounds during your pregnancy."

Simply be realistic about your weight gain and try to focus on eating healthy foods. Talk to your caregiver about how much weight he or she recommends for you.

Maintaining wellness

"Pregnancy tends to make weight control even more difficult, particularly because of societal norms that justify eating more during that time ('eating for two')," points out Dr. Hadden. To stay healthy, keep an eye on weight gain and remain active. Eat lots of fruits and vegetables, and take your daily prenatal vitamin. Seeing a registered dietician or nutritionist may be a good idea. "The main thing to remember is that you have to face your body post-pregnancy," says Leanne Ely, a certified nutrition consultant and author of *Healthy Foods*. "If you pig out on milk shakes, hamburgers and French fries (like I did with my first child), you'll end up with a whole lot more to lose than baby fat after the baby. Stick with the healthy stuff and have a treat occasionally. I did that with my second child and gained half the weight I did with my first and still had a big baby. You only need an extra 300 calories each day... But make those calories count. Eat smart, and eat healthy." ▶▶



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Staying active will help you feel better and control weight gain. This doesn't have to mean doing step aerobics or jogging. "Swimming and prenatal yoga are incredible activities for pregnancy," says Vireday. "Both are especially suited for pregnant women and are size-friendly, too. Both help you relax and go deep into yourself, and have great benefits physically."

New to fitness routines? Lisa Stone, an ACE-certified fitness instructor in Atlanta, Georgia, says to start slowly: Try a 10- to 15-minute moderately-paced walk on flat terrain. "As you start to feel stronger, add time to your walk in five-minute increments, gradually increasing to 45 minutes three to five times per week. Once you can walk that duration comfortably, try adding some low hills into your walking route to add intensity." She adds, "Be sure to take along a bottle of water and take a big swig every 10 to 15 minutes so you stay well hydrated." The March of Dimes in its *Weight Matters* report recommends that overweight women continue being active during pregnancy but avoid activities that create extreme fatigue.

Exercise is important not only for your baby but for your health too. A 1997 study in the *American Journal of Epidemiology* showed that moderate amounts of exercise cut the rate of gestational diabetes in overweight women. The frequency or amount of the exercise wasn't as important as the simple fact that the women engaged in some form of exercise. ACOG (the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists) issued new guidelines in 2001 recommending all pregnant women obtain at least 30 minutes of accumulated exercise on most days. Dr. Nancy S. Green, medical director of the March of Dimes, says, "Overweight women who were previously exercising before pregnancy can continue to do so, unless they have a medical reason not to. Overweight women who want to start exercising during pregnancy are advised to do something easy, like walking, and to build up gradually. However, every pregnant woman should check with her healthcare provider before starting or continuing an exercise program."

Doing simple stretches at home can help make physical activity more comfortable and can help prepare your body for birth. Since every woman is different, and because larger women may have other health- and fitness-related issues to consider (such as ways to avoid joint strain), be sure to talk to your caregiver about what kind of exercise will work best for you.

To a healthy birth

The thought of a hospital stay may be daunting when you consider the prospect of too-small gowns, frequent cervical checks and a variety of nurses, residents and other caregivers in

the hospital setting. Undoubtedly, you will find varying degrees of size-friendliness in personnel and equipment.

What may be particularly intimidating is the idea of showing these strangers what you're made of. "I am thinking about how to deliver this child and not be totally mortified about my weight," admits Long Islander Eileen. "In the Bradley Classes I am attending, they say that on your back is the most unnatural way to deliver a baby. They recommend squatting, in a birthing chair or — God forbid — on all fours. Can you just imagine my big butt there for the world to see? Oh no, I don't think so."

Dr. Shanahan also recommends squatting or knee-chest positions to help open the pelvis. The goal is to help your baby move out by working with your body and with gravity. "I delivered my [third] daughter in the semi-sitting position on the bed. It worked well for me at 323 pounds," says Andrise, a mom in Wisconsin. "I pushed two times in six minutes and delivered a 9-pound, 7-ounce baby with no tears or episiotomy."

Unfortunately, not every plus-size mom will get to have a vaginal birth, as the primary (first-time) cesarean section rate is three times higher in obese women than for their more slender counterparts. "The c-section rate is higher mainly because babies are bigger and are less likely to fit through the birth canal," says Dr. Shanahan. She also notes, "Obese women are more likely to have complications from c-sections, especially increased blood loss and infection."

In general though, plus-size women can have normal, healthy pregnancies and deliveries. Complications are the exception, not the norm. Like any expectant mother, if you take care of yourself and find a caregiver who will work with you, your happy ending is just weeks away. ■

About the author: Brette McWhorter Sember is a former attorney and the author of The Visitation Handbook: Your Complete Guide to Parenting Apart and Repair Your Own Credit and Deal With Debt. She is the mother of two children.

RESOURCES

Find more for you on the Web! Click over to ePregnancy.com/go and enter the [go] codes shown.

BBW (plus-size) moms message board: [go] 3349

Plus-size fitness tips: [go] 2550

Plus-size pregnancy and caregiver-patient relationships: [go] 2714

Maternity fashion tips for tall women: [go] 827

Plus-size maternity: [go] 786

Next time: Part 2: Feeling Good About Yourself

Over the moon

"Most hospitals have larger gowns for larger patients," says Dr. Shanahan. "When walking around in labor, one gown can be worn open in the back with a second worn like a robe to prevent any unintended mooning."

Hearing the heartbeat

Your caregiver may have some difficulty locating the baby's heartbeat in the early months of pregnancy due to the thickness of the abdomen. Don't panic or be embarrassed if this happens to you. He or she may order an ultrasound to make sure everything is fine — and in all likelihood, it will be.