

Plus-Size

PREGNANCY

by Brette McWhorter Sember

With over half of all pregnant women falling in the plus-size category, plus-size pregnancy is something that can no longer be ignored. If you're plus-sized, for years, you've probably heard things about how your weight can affect your health. But being plus-sized doesn't mean you can't have a wonderful, healthy pregnancy and a beautiful, healthy baby if you get the information you need and receive good 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 to 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. They don't try to impose their agendas and opinions about size issues, but they do offer gentle advice if it is asked for," says Pamela Vireday, a childbirth educator in Oregon. 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").

But 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, 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. Some such questions might include:

- Do you consider yourself to be 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?

"Some women are ashamed and don't want their caregiver to mention the issue at all, but in my experience, this hesitation to talk about it may serve to hide a bias on the part of the caregiver that you may not find out 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 is I've found it to have an open dialogue with my caregiver, to be able to talk about the what the real risks being overweight may present, but not to assume that they will occur."

If the answers you receive make you uncomfortable, go elsewhere. Ask other plus-size moms who they saw for obstetrical care, or call OB offices on the phone and ask point blank if the healthcare provider has a size-friendly attitude towards larger 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 you want a caregiver who can do so without blaming you or scolding you. Don't be embarrassed by your weight or shape — doctors and midwives see bodies of all shapes and sizes all the time. It is important that you 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 a woman's 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."

Health Concerns

You may worry that your weight will affect your chances for a healthy pregnancy. Remember that the odds are that you will have a healthy pregnancy and deliver a healthy 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. Large women should make sure their blood pressure is taken with an appropriate sized cuff — too small a cuff will

lead to a false elevation in blood pressure."

Plus-size moms-to-be are at increased risk for gestational diabetes, 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 cesarean sections and more risk of injury to the baby during a vaginal birth." There's an increased risk of shoulder dystocia, where the shoulders get stuck, which can lead to 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 this.

The March of Dimes in its February 2002 report "Nutrition Today Matters Tomorrow", reports that overweight women are at a 30 percent to 40 percent higher risk of delivering babies with birth defects. Don't panic — the 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 to 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.

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-friendly personnel and equipment.

But what may be particularly intimidating is the idea of showing these strangers what you're made of. "I am totally thinking about how to deliver this child and not be totally mortified about my weight," admits Long Islander Eileen. "I know that in the Bradley Classes that I am attending they say that on your back is the most unnatural way to deliver a baby. They recommend squatting, or 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 more. 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 it is 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-section, 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 other expectant mother, if you take care of yourself and find a caregiver that will work with you, your happy ending can and will come true.

Brette Sember is a plus-size mom and co-author of Your Plus-Size Pregnancy: The Ultimate Guide for the Full-Figured Expectant Mom (Barricade Books), which has been endorsed by OB/GYN Department of the State University of New York at Buffalo Medical School. She is also the owner of
www.YourPlusSizePregnancy.com.

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