

Q&A with Brette McWhorter Sember, co-author of **Your Plus-Size Pregnancy: The Ultimate Guide for the Full-Figured Expectant Mom** (Barricade Books, 2005)

Q: Are there really a lot of plus-size pregnant women?

A: 97 million people in the US are overweight and more than half of all women who are pregnant wear a size 14 or larger. In fact you're more likely to be plus-size while you're pregnant than to wear a regular size.

Q: Isn't it dangerous to be overweight and pregnant?

A: Everyone knows that being overweight is a risk. And it is true that being pregnant and overweight does increase risk factors for certain things. It's important to look at things in perspective. Yes, if you have gestational diabetes or preeclampsia they are medical conditions that your doctor is going to monitor. But if you're healthy, it's overwhelmingly likely that you're going to have a normal pregnancy and a wonderful happy baby. The media has blown risk factors for plus-size pregnant women out of proportion. It was big news a while ago that an overweight woman has twice the risk of having a baby with a birth defect. That sounds scary until you realize that the risk of birth defects for regular weight women is 1.4% - less than 2 women of regular weight out of 100 will have a baby with this. If you double this, less than 3 women who are overweight out of 100 will have a baby with a birth defect. Not that big of a difference really. It sounds a lot scarier than it is.

Q: So how should plus-size moms deal with elevated risks?

A: The first thing is to not panic. Most overweight women are going to have healthy pregnancies. Stop worrying about something that probably isn't going to happen. Secondly, make sure you have a

doctor or midwife that you are comfortable with and trust. Ask about these risks and ask if your health care provider recommends any special monitoring during your pregnancy.

Q: Do plus-size moms have bigger babies?

A: In general, plus-size moms are more likely to have bigger babies. Sometimes this is because the mom has gestational diabetes, which can result in a bigger baby. Also, many doctors believe that large, big-boned people are going to pass on their genes and have large, big-boned babies. Big babies can be hard to deliver, which may mean a C-section, but big babies tend to be much healthier than underweight babies.

Q: Aren't most doctors well prepared to care for plus-size pregnant women?

A: Most doctors and midwives are wonderful and are extremely knowledgeable about plus-size pregnancy. Most are also sensitive to how plus-size moms feel. Unfortunately there are some health care providers who are not so wonderful. I interviewed lots of plus-size moms for my book, and there were a lot of horror stories about insensitive or uneducated doctors. Your health care provider should not order test after test solely based on your weight if you do not have any other symptoms or risk factors. Your health care provider should not make you feel guilty about your size or order you not to gain any weight. The nurses who take your blood pressure should not make an ordeal out of getting a larger cuff or sliding over more weights on the scale.

Q: Shouldn't plus-size pregnant women go on a diet?

A: No! It is never safe to try to lose weight while pregnant. Experts recommend that most overweight women gain between 15 and 20 pounds while pregnant. It's important to realize that

when you gain weight during pregnancy, you're not packing fat on. You're growing a baby as well as creating amniotic fluid, a placenta and increased blood and fluid in your own body. What is important for plus-size women, just as with all other pregnant women is to eat a healthy balanced diet while pregnant.

Q: If you're plus-sized and pregnant, how do you stay positive and feel good about yourself?

A: It's really important to focus on your pregnancy and the wonderful outcome – your baby. Think about the amazing work your body is doing and pat yourself on the back for it. Every woman feels self-conscious about her body during pregnancy and many plus-size women come into pregnancy with body image issues to begin with, so it is a difficult time. Do things for yourself that pamper your body, your mind, and your spirit. Get a manicure, learn a new hobby, or take up meditation. Do things that feel good and stay positive about yourself.

Q: What are some of the most surprising things your book reveals?

A: I'm a plus-size mom of two and I thought I had experienced a lot, but the wonderful women who spoke to me so candidly in interviews for this book told me stories that shocked and surprised even me. I think the way many plus-size women are denigrated by their health care providers really shocked me. I also learned a lot of things while researching the book that are fairly new information – such as plus-size moms who are trying nurse may find that it takes longer for their milk to come in than for thinner women. Many moms give up, not realizing they may need to give it more time.

Q: How can plus-size women stay healthy during their pregnancies and reduce their risks of complications?

A: Find a health care provider you trust who treats you with respect and dignity. If you are afraid to talk to your doctor or uncomfortable asking questions, you put yourself at risk because you don't have complete communication. Plus-size moms should eat a healthy diet and try not to focus on size. They should also try to exercise once a day, even if it means walking around the mall or doing arm curls with a half gallon of milk in your hand. I also cannot emphasize how important the mental component of this is. Stay positive, focus on your pregnancy, reward yourself, and surround yourself with people who support you.

Q: In your opinion, what are some of the most difficult parts of being plus-size and pregnant?

A: One of the hardest things is being made to feel you are somehow different than other pregnant women. A lot of maternity stores don't carry clothes in your size. That alone makes you feel ostracized. I think it's difficult to be pregnant, which is really all about getting bigger, when you've always been made to feel that being big is a bad thing. It's tough to reconcile that and feel good about what's happening with your body. Another problem is what I call Invisible Pregnancy Syndrome. You go through a few months where your body is changing but no one can tell you're pregnant. You worry that you just look like you gained weight instead of looking like a stick figure with a cute little basketball tummy.

Q: Why did you write this book?

A: I'm a plus-size mom of two and so I know first hand the problems and concerns faced by curvy moms. I had a lot of questions during my pregnancies (some of which I was too embarrassed to ask my own doctor), so this is the book that I wish I had had during my own pregnancies. I was fortunate enough to be able to work with Dr. Bruce Rodgers on this book and to get the endorsement of the

State University Of NY at Buffalo School of Medicine Department of OB/GYN, and I really feel that this book is a complete guide for plus-size moms. It's not meant to replace your other pregnancy books, but is instead everything else you need to know as a plus-size mom.