

STYZED

When my doorbell rang one dark night last fall, I wasn't surprised to see a cow standing on my front porch, holding hands with a small cowboy. After all, it was Halloween. But I was surprised to see how sad the cow looked. My very pregnant friend Lena stood there, disconsolate in her brown and white costume, a tail swaying from her backside and rubber udders protruding from her belly.

PREGNANCY

By Marjorie Osterhout

"Wow," I said. "Nice get-up."

"Fat cow. Pregnant. Get it?" she said, without even the smallest smile. I would have hugged her, but the rubber spears looked too scary.

"It could be worse," I said, and held out the candy bowl. And it could be. Besides a few too-thin celebs and models, what pregnant woman doesn't feel as big as a house at some point? Bellies and babies are a package deal. But very overweight women who become pregnant may bump into special challenges. Pregnancy symptoms and tests that are normally considered routine may be far from that for overweight moms-to-be. It can be hard to find a doctor with a "size-friendly" staff, equipment and attitude. Attractive maternity clothes are scarce. And eventually, those extra pounds can be unhealthy for mom and her baby.

If you are overweight and thinking about conceiving, you might wonder whether those extra pounds will prevent you from having a smooth pregnancy. What's the most you should weigh? How many pounds should you lose? Unfortunately, there's no magic number on the scale. Weight is only one factor in measuring your health. Related questions include your eating and exercise habits, whether you've gained or lost a lot of weight recently, blood sugar levels, thyroid function, family history and blood pressure, among other things.

According to Dr. Jeffrey Rakoff, medical director of the Scripps Clinic Fertility Center in San Diego, CA, it's safe for women to lose weight while trying to conceive (although it's not once you're pregnant). But he emphasizes that general lifestyle changes and help from your caregiver are key. "Number one: No diet drugs. Number two: Whatever diet you're going to go on, make sure you have your doctor's supervision. But make it a lifestyle change

be considered a last resort, especially for patients over a certain weight range or body mass index (BMI). Dr. Minassian notes that after surgery, patients should avoid pregnancy for a year or more while they recover and adjust to their new physical needs.

What's a BMI? The number on the scale is just one way to measure how healthy you are in terms of your weight. Your body mass index, or BMI, adjusts weight for height and can be a more

always talk to your care provider if you have concerns about your weight).

BMI	Weight Status
Below 18.5	Underweight
18.5 – 24.9	Normal
25.0 – 29.9	Overweight
30.0 and Above	Obese

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If you want to lose weight before getting pregnant, talk to your healthcare provider first. He or she can help rule out (or treat) other medical issues that might make it hard or impossible for you to lose weight. Your caregiver can also help you create new habits that you're willing to live with for the long term, so you're not just making radical changes that won't last.

Very obese women can — and do — have healthy pregnancies and babies without any special care. But there are some pitfalls to watch for and some useful guidelines to consider.

Obesity is associated with several pregnancy complications. One of them, preeclampsia (high blood pressure), is seen more often in obese women and can lead to seizures, premature delivery, fetal distress and worse. Gestational diabetes is also more common.

Some caregivers find that routine tests are trickier when a pregnant woman is significantly overweight. For example, ultrasound tests can be more difficult, which makes it harder to predict your due date. Some studies also suggest a slightly increased risk of fluid leakage and miscarriage with amniocentesis. An obese woman is also more likely to have a Cesarean section, which has its own risks.

Another thing you should consider is that generally, larger pregnant women don't gain weight in the same way as their smaller counterparts. If you were overweight before getting pregnant, your healthcare provider may recommend a weight gain of between 15 and 25 pounds. Larger women may gain only 5-15 pounds, and some very large women actually lose weight while pregnant. It's crucial to work

that you're going to live with forever and ever," he advises.

The phrases "lifestyle changes" and "forever and ever" can seem daunting. But even small changes, like switching to diet soda or whole wheat bread, can have an effect. Your caregiver should be able to refer you to nutritionists and other specialists who can help you craft a plan that's easy to live with.

If you are significantly overweight and older, declining fertility rates may mean you don't have time to lose a lot of weight before trying to get pregnant, especially if you suffer from polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS). PCOS is a common cause of obesity and infertility in women. Women with PCOS need medical help to lose weight and perhaps to become pregnant.

A growing number of women are having gastric bypass surgery with the ultimate goal of losing enough weight to get pregnant. But according to Dr. Shahab S. Minassian, director of reproductive endocrinology and infertility at Hahnemann University Hospital in Philadelphia, PA, gastric bypass surgery is a risky procedure and should

accurate number in terms of your health.

The Centers for Disease Control define a BMI over 30 as obese, which applies to about one third of the American public. But a pregnant woman with a BMI of 48 faces entirely different problems than a pregnant woman with a BMI of 30.

The easiest way to calculate your BMI is to use one of the many BMI calculators on the Internet. You can find one at MyFreeDiet.com. You can also figure it out yourself:

- Weigh yourself and record the number. (For example, 180 lbs.)
- Multiply your height in inches by itself. (For example, if you are five feet four inches tall, you are 64 inches tall. $64 \times 64 = 4096$.)
- Divide the answer to Step 1 by the answer to Step 2. (For example, 180 divided by 4096 is 0.044 .)
- Multiply the result by 703. This is your BMI. (For example, $0.044 \times 703 = 30.93$.)

This chart lists general guidelines for your weight status based on your BMI (but

closely with your healthcare provider to make sure you and your baby are gaining enough weight.

When thinking about your weight during pregnancy, don't overlook your most important health goals: to eat enough nutritious foods, exercise carefully and sleep well. Eating nutritious food is crucial for any pregnant woman, but good nutrition is especially important if you dieted before getting pregnant or have years of bad eating habits that could impact your health now. Talk to your healthcare provider about taking prenatal vitamins and folic acid. And if morning sickness interferes with nutrition, ask for help! Don't think you just have to suffer through it; there are many ways to combat nausea during pregnancy, and different remedies work for different people.

Finding a size-friendly doctor can be difficult. You've likely heard stories about clinics that refuse to treat obese women who are pregnant or trying to conceive. While many of these stories are nothing more than urban legends, Dr. Rakoff notes that some caregivers do have this bias. How do you weed them out? Dr. Rakoff suggests you call the head nurse and ask him or her point blank if the doctor turns away people with a BMI over a certain number. You might also note whether the clinic has overweight employees. If so, it's probably safe to assume they are less likely to turn away overweight patients.

You may need to be sure that your caregiver has equipment that's appropriate for larger women. For example, using a regular-size blood pressure cuff on a very large arm can result in a blood pressure reading that's artificially high. Examining gowns may be too small, although many clinics and hospitals have larger sizes. Scales are another common concern, but most clinics and hospitals can easily accommodate people of every weight without special equipment.

As you embark on your pregnancy journey, eat healthy, take care of your body and try not to worry too much. Instead, focus on the excitement and joy your little one will bring into your life even before he's born. ☺

About the Author: Marjorie Osterhout is a freelance writer in Seattle.

Additional Resources

See these sources for more information about weight-related pregnancy issues.

The Plus-Size Pregnancy Website:

Plus-Size-Pregnancy.org has everything a woman of size needs to know, from preconception to pregnancy.

Size-Friendly Health Professionals:

Cat-And-Dragon.com/stef/Fat/ffp.html is a listing of health professionals recommended as size-friendly by patients or by themselves.

Your Plus-Size Pregnancy: The Ultimate Guide for the Full-Figured

Expectant Mother: This book by Brette McWhorter Sember and Dr. Bruce D. Rodgers offers advice, information and support for plus-size moms-to-be. Find it for \$15 at BarricadeBooks.com.

POLL) Readers Respond

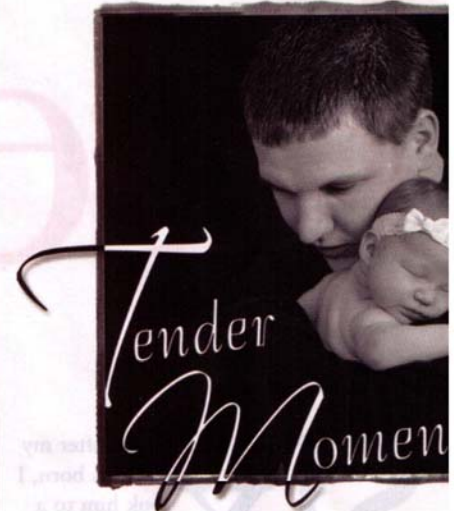
Pregnancy has made me:

- 37% More worried about my weight
- 30% Less worried about my weight
- 20% More confident about my body in general
- 13% Less confident about my body in general

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