



## Pregnancy and Body Image

By: Dr. Jenn Berman



Average 5 out of 5

When I ran into my friend Susan at a maternity boutique, I just assumed she was shopping for a pregnant friend until she told me that she was actually five months pregnant. She barely looked like she had eaten a big meal, much less that she was carrying another life inside of her. "You know me," she reminded me. "I have always been neurotic about my weight. I just really didn't want to let myself go, so I have been really careful about gaining weight."

Susan is not alone. More and more pregnant women are maintaining their weight "neurosis" or, even worse, their eating disorders well into pregnancy. New York Magazine ran an article in September of 2004 titled *The Perfect Little Bump* in which it explored the weight obsession of pregnant women today. The author, Laurie Abraham, went so far as to say, "Perhaps at no time and in no place in history have so many women been under so much pressure to stay thin and gorgeous while simultaneously producing human life."

Many of these women attempt to avoid adding any weight, feel shameful about how much they have gained, and restrict carbohydrates, fats or calories while pregnant despite doctors' warnings not to do so.

### Doctor, Doctor

Weight gain during pregnancy is essential in order to nurture a growing baby. Most doctors today recommend that a woman of normal weight should gain 25 to 35 pound during the course of a singleton pregnancy, and more still for a multiples pregnancy. But many women struggle to accept that extra weight. Two studies on eating disorders and weight have shown that most pregnant women worry that they will not be able to lose the baby weight and over half say they dislike their pregnant appearance. Weight gain can be difficult to accept because it happens so quickly that often there is not enough emotional time to adjust to the changes. Regardless of the mother's issues, however, her appropriate weight gain is absolutely vital to the healthy development of her baby.

Poor maternal nutrition or eating disorders puts the baby at risk for the following:

- Premature labor
- Low birth weight
- Stillbirth or fetal death
- Intrauterine growth retardation
- Likelihood of caesarean birth
- Delayed fetal growth
- Respiratory problems
- Gestational diabetes
- Low amniotic fluid
- Preeclampsia
- Complications during labor
- Miscarriage

According to a 2002 article printed in the *New England Journal of Medicine* these babies are at a higher risk for neurological and developmental problems including include lower IQs, learning disabilities, cerebral palsy, lung disease and psychiatric illnesses such as anxiety and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder. Further studies show that malnutrition during pregnancy can cause everything from mood disorders to obesity.

### What's an Eating Disordered Girl to Do?

It has been estimated that eight million women in the United States have an eating disorder. If you include subclinical eating disorders, those that don't qualify based on the Diagnostic and Statistical manual but have "food issues," the number goes up exponentially. Of course the ideal is to overcome your eating disorder before you get pregnant but, if it is too late, I strongly recommend the following steps:

- Talk with your obstetrician honestly about your eating disorder.
- Work closely with a nutritionist who has experience working both with pregnant woman and with eating disorders.
- Focus on the well-being of your baby.
- Get support from other pregnant women.
- Find things to appreciate about your body.
- Express your feelings so you don't act them out by eating or starving.
- Don't restrict your eating.
- Strive for healthy weight gain.
- Exercise moderately (with your doctor's permission).
- Work with a therapist to recover and be healthy.

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