

## Weight Gain in Pregnancy

Obesity is an epidemic in the United States today with approximately one-third of adult women being obese. The complications linked to obesity are significant and affect most organ systems. Although weight issues are complex in nature and usually involve broaching a sensitive topic, it is important to address the risks linked to excessive weight and weight gain in pregnancy. Given the prevalence of obesity now and the increase in associated problems, it is necessary to take action to reduce unnecessary weight gain during pregnancy.

Many women who are overweight or obese prior to conceiving go on to have healthy babies; however, obesity is a known risk factor for multiple pregnancy complications. Studies show higher rates of birth defects, diabetes, pregnancy induced high blood pressure, preeclampsia, stillbirth, fetal growth problems, cesarean delivery, postpartum hemorrhage, and infection. Some studies also show obesity to be an independent risk factor for miscarriage. The higher the body mass index (BMI), the higher the chance one will need a cesarean section. Obese women have more complications during and after cesarean surgery, including longer operating time, excessive blood loss and wound infection. There are anesthetic challenges like more difficult epidural placement and respiratory problems. Other concerns relate to poor visualization of fetal anatomy on ultrasound, difficulty estimating fetal weight and monitoring fetal heart rates. Also, babies of obese women are known to have greater risks of stillbirth, prematurity, macrosomia (large for gestational age), neural tube defects and childhood obesity.

Most define obesity during pregnancy with a pre-pregnant BMI of greater than 30 kg/m<sup>2</sup>. Online BMI calculators are available at: [www.cdc.gov/healthyweight/assessing/bmi/index.html](http://www.cdc.gov/healthyweight/assessing/bmi/index.html), the website of the Center for Disease Control, or [www.nhlbisupport.com/bmi](http://www.nhlbisupport.com/bmi). A normal weight (before pregnancy) is defined as having a BMI between 18.5-24.9. A BMI of 25-29.9 describes an overweight adult, and a BMI of 30 or greater constitutes obesity. There are classes of obesity (I, II, III) with BMIs 30-34.9, 35-39.9 and above 40 that define morbid obesity.

The Institute of Medicine recommends obese women gain no more than 15 pounds, overweight women should gain between 15 - 25 pounds and normal weight women could gain 25 - 35 pounds. Pregnant women do not need additional calories until later in the second and third trimesters when an extra 300 calories a day will suffice. It is most important to follow an exercise program and to consider nutritional counseling to maximize the nutritional content of the calories consumed. The American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology (ACOG) recommends pregnant women get at least 30 minutes of moderate exercise on most days, if not every day of the week. Avoiding excessive weight gain during pregnancy can prevent many pregnancy complications as well as postpartum obesity (and increased risks with a future pregnancy). Also, breast feeding can help one return to her pre-pregnancy weight.