

# Weight changes during Pregnancy

Weight may be a sensitive subject for some women. However, because of the great benefit to you and your baby, it is recommended that you should try to reach a healthy weight before you become pregnant. By reaching a healthy weight, you are protecting your health and your baby's wellbeing.

Women who are underweight or overweight have a higher chance of challenges in pregnancy and are likely to require additional care and support. Your doctor or midwife will explain the relevant risks associated with your BMI to help minimise these risks. Conversations about weight can be challenging for both women and care providers.

However, if you are not at a healthy weight, it is important you discuss this with your doctor or midwife so that a plan that suits your individual needs can be made and potential challenges in pregnancy and birth can be reduced.

Weight stigma felt by women receiving pregnancy care is a recognised risk factor for adverse psychological and physical health issues. If you feel you are spoken to in an inappropriate way, it is important that you speak up as counselling should be sensitive and non-judgmental.

## BMI and Pregnancy

Your body mass index (BMI) is a comparison of your weight to your height. Your BMI will be calculated at your first antenatal appointment, ideally by 12 weeks of pregnancy. A healthy BMI is above 18.5 and below 25. Many women are unaware of the how much weight they should put on during pregnancy and some gain more than is ideal. The table below shows the recommended range of weight gain in pregnancy by BMI. It is a common misconception that pregnant women 'need to eat for two'. Most pregnant women only need an extra 300 calories per day (the equivalent to a glass of skimmed milk, or half a sandwich).

Weight gain recommendations based on your BMI should be used as a guide as BMI does not necessarily indicate your health or how fat is distributed on your body. As your baby grows, you will likely gain weight gradually as well. This weight gain can come from the baby, placenta, breast tissue, amniotic and body fluids.

BMI	Classification	Recommended pregnancy weight gain
Less than 18.5	Underweight	12.5–18kg
18.5–24.9	Normal weight	11.5–16kg
25–29.9	Overweight	6.8–11.3kg
More than 30	Obese	5–9.1kg

Gaining excessive weight in pregnancy, beyond the recommended levels, can increase the chance of pregnancy complications. Your doctor or midwife will be able to provide general nutritional information to help you achieve the recommended weight gain during your pregnancy.

Women may also lose weight in the first trimester because of morning sickness. However, weight will usually be regained and continue to increase normally. If



morning sickness is severe or prolonged, you should seek advice from your doctor or midwife.

## What are the problems associated with a low BMI during pregnancy?

Women who are very underweight may have an increased chance of having a baby early (preterm birth), with a low birth weight and nutritional problems. It is uncertain whether being underweight increases risk of miscarriage. It is essential that you and your baby receive the vitamins and minerals you require. Most of these can be gained through good nutrition and a healthy diet. You may be referred to a dietician who can help you to optimise your diet.

## What are the problems associated with a high BMI during pregnancy?

Most pregnant women who have a high BMI can expect to enjoy a healthy pregnancy. However, having a raised BMI increases the chance of complications for both you and your baby. The higher your BMI, the higher the risks.

As your BMI increases, so does the likelihood of one or more of the following problems occurring:

- A blood clot in the leg (deep vein thrombosis) or in your lungs (pulmonary embolism)
- Gestational diabetes, a form of diabetes that develops during pregnancy
- High blood pressure and pre-eclampsia
- Difficulties with some procedures – a high BMI can make it difficult to monitor your baby's heartbeat, or to view certain problems with the baby's organs on an ultrasound scan, or to give you an epidural.

The problems for your baby associated with a high BMI include:

- Problems with the development of the baby's brain and spine (neural tube defects)
- Higher rate of miscarriage
- Higher rate of premature birth
- A birth weight greater than 4kg
- Admission to a special care nursery
- Higher rate of stillbirth
- Increased chance of obesity and diabetes later in life.

## What are the problems associated with a high BMI during labour and birth?

There is an increased risk of complications during labour and birth, particularly if you have a BMI above 40. If your BMI is above 40 you may need to have your baby at a hospital with the appropriate facilities and experienced clinicians to provide the specialised care that meets your needs.

Some of the problems include:

- Your baby being born prematurely (before 37 weeks)
- Difficulty monitoring the baby's heartbeat
- Anaesthetic complications
- Greater likelihood of requiring an emergency caesarean section



- Shoulder dystocia (when the baby's head is born, but the shoulders do not come out. The doctor or midwife will take steps to help the shoulders to be born)
- Heavy bleeding after birth (postpartum haemorrhage).

Because of these possible complications, you should have a discussion with your obstetrician or midwife about the safest place to give birth.





## How can the chance of having these problems be reduced?

Despite having a high BMI, you can still have a healthy pregnancy through careful management of your weight, attention to diet and exercise, regular antenatal care to monitor for complications, and special considerations for your labour and baby's birth.

Your doctors and midwives may recommend one or more of the following (especially if you have a BMI above 40) to achieve the best possible pregnancy outcome for you and your baby:

- Referral to a specialist antenatal clinic
- Referral to a dietician
- Referral to the anaesthetist
- Low dose aspirin (100mg) and calcium (1500-2000mg) to reduce the chance of preeclampsia
- Extra ultrasound scans to monitor your baby's growth
- Early testing for gestational diabetes during pregnancy

By working together with your healthcare team, the chance of having complications can be reduced for both you and your baby. A healthy diet and regular exercise have long term benefits. Simple tips to help you plan a healthy meal:

- base your meals around vegetables with a side of lean protein and a side of starch (bread, pasta, rice etc)
- consume mostly wholegrain foods
- avoid processed, packaged foods such as fast food and soft drinks
- aim to eat at least two fresh fruits daily. Limit fruit juice.
- The RANZCOG website provides further information about exercise during pregnancy: <https://ranzcoг.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Exercise-during-pregnancy-pamphlet.pdf>

## After Pregnancy

Once you are home with your baby, stick to your healthy eating plan and exercise habits. Returning to pre-pregnancy weight is a different experience for each person and can be difficult while caring for your baby. It is normal to have gained weight during pregnancy and lose this weight afterwards. Highly restrictive diets are not recommended after the birth of your baby, particularly if you are breastfeeding. Breastfeeding is recommended for the first year of a baby's life. It is the recommended way to feed your baby, and it may also help you to achieve your healthy recommended weight. Overall, women who breastfeed their babies for at least the first few months tend to lose the weight they gained during pregnancy faster than women who do not breastfeed.

If your BMI is above 40 you may need to take extra precautions to prevent blood clots in your legs or lungs. Simple ways to prevent blood clots are to exercise regularly and to keep well hydrated.

You may be prescribed medication to reduce the risk of blood clots forming.

Getting to a healthy weight after pregnancy reduces your risks in future pregnancies as well as improving your long-term health.

## Useful resources

- <https://www.pregnancybirthbaby.org.au/losing-weight-after-birth-safely>
- <https://asdah.org/health-at-every-size-haes-approach/>



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