Battling Obesity Ahead of Pregnancy is ‘Beautifully Individual’

The year of the pandemic has not been easy. It has left most doctors and essential workers drained from the added stress. But I just got off a telehealth visit (sadly, a part of my new normal) with my long-standing patient and I am so excited! My patient (and myself) has struggled to lose weight for most of her life, but considering some of her chronic medical conditions, she was so motivated to lose weight prior to her pregnancy. I am so ecstatic because I love my patient! My patient, beautiful inside and out, has just made some lifestyle changes that will make her pregnancy that much safer for her and her baby.

Obesity and Its Impact during Pregnancy

Based on a large US survey, close to 60% of women are either overweight or obese. Unfortunately, obesity increases risks for both mom and baby during pregnancy. In early pregnancy, obese women have an increased risk of miscarriage and later in pregnancy an increased risk of stillbirth. There is also an increased risk of birth defects, most notably defects of the spinal cord, heart, face and limbs. Additionally, detecting these anomalies poses a greater challenge. Accounting for how ultrasound scientifically works, it is difficult for ultrasound detection of fetal abnormalities in obese women. The higher the body mass index of a patient, the lower the anomaly detection rate. Compared to non-obese women, obese women also have higher risks of heart complications, diabetes in pregnancy, sleep apnea, blood pressure disorders such as preeclampsia and heart dysfunction. Our obese patients need to be closely monitored for possible complications throughout pregnancy.

At time of delivery, studies and clinical practice tell us that obese women have an increased risk of a cesarean section. After their delivery, they are more apt to struggle with an infection of the womb or infection of the cesarean incision.

Prepping Before Pregnancy

January is Birth Defects Prevention Month and this year’s theme is “5 Tips for Birth Defects Prevention,” which includes the following tip: Before you get pregnant, try to maintain a healthy weight.



Due to all the potential complications, the best time to address obesity is before becoming pregnant. This is where mom-to-be may need the greatest support in helping to optimize health and the health of baby. Weight loss is the one thing we can do to help change our health. I often tell my patients that we cannot change our genetics, our family or personal medical history, but we can make lifestyle changes that can make a lasting difference in our baby's health and ours. Achieving optimal weight, or even just starting to work toward it, can be achieved through so many avenues such as nutrition and exercise, help with medication, or even surgery. The many approaches should be personally customized to mom-to-be.

During pregnancy, we recommend less weight gain for our overweight patients. Overweight and obese patients should gain between 15-25 lb (6.8-11.3 kg) and 11-20 lb (5.0-9.1 kg) respectively. Increased testing and monitoring in pregnancy is often recommended. A healthy diet in protein, fats and carbohydrates as well as exercise should be discussed with your doctor. What works for me may not work for some of my patients and that is important to know – Each of us are beautifully individual!

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