

Weight gain: not too much and not too little

Some women are concerned about 'getting fat' during pregnancy, while others use it as an excuse to gain large amounts of weight. They may not be aware that while weight gain is essential during pregnancy, excess weight gain is dangerous.

Women should understand that their weight at the start of their pregnancy and the weight gained during their pregnancy are critical aspects of health care to improve maternal and child health outcomes. Appropriate weight gain is associated with better pregnancy outcomes while excessive weight gain is associated with gestational diabetes mellitus, preterm delivery and Large for Gestational Age (LGA) babies. Prepregnancy obesity is also an independent risk factor for neural tube defects, still birth and preterm birth; while maternal obesity is associated with a more than doubled risk of stillbirth and perinatal death.

"Obese women have an increased risk of developing complications when they're pregnant; appropriate weight gain during pregnancy may help decrease these risks. All women, especially overweight or obese women, should seek nutrition and lifestyle counselling from a registered dietitian before and throughout their pregnancies," says Berna Harmse, ADSA president.

Weight gain is expected, as a woman's body undergoes a number of changes during pregnancy that account for the weight gained. These include increased volumes of blood, amniotic fluid and extracellular fluid; enlarged uterine and mammary glands; increased fat stores; and the growth of the placenta and the baby itself.

So not all pregnancy weight gain is 'fat' as women often think, and much of it is lost when the baby is born. In fact, ADSA says women who gain the recommended amounts of weight during their pregnancies can expect to reach their pre-pregnancy weight goals within a few months of delivery. Some weight is lost when the tissue balance is re-established, and fat deposits are easily burnt up when a woman is exclusively breastfeeding her baby.

Registered dietitians can advise women on the recommended range of weight gain during their pregnancy. The amount will depend on the woman's weight before she fell pregnant and the number of babies she's expecting. Dietitians are also able to use these figures, combined with the woman's age and activity levels, to determine the amounts and types of foods she should be eating while pregnant. Good nutrition during pregnancy is not only vital for appropriate weight gain, but also to ensure the long-term health of both mother and child.