

The weight of expectation

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Weighing the risk ... avoid excessive weight gain during pregnancy.

We know that it's smart to bin cigarettes and alcohol during pregnancy but how many women realise that it's also important not to be overweight?

Not enough, according to endocrinologist Dr Alison Nankervis of Royal Melbourne Hospital, who says that around 35 per cent of Australian women are already overweight or obese when they conceive - and that's not the best start for a pregnancy.

Carrying too much weight at the beginning of pregnancy – or packing on too many kilos as the months roll on - not only increases the risk of complications, she says, but can set the next generation up for weight problems and possibly diabetes too

"No one thinks 'I want to get pregnant so I'd better lose weight if I need to', yet that's the message that needs to be out there, along with messages about smoking and alcohol," she says. "It's not about making women feel guilty, but about helping them prepare for pregnancy," says Nankervis who believes women aren't getting enough information about what's a healthy amount of weight to gain in pregnancy.

Overweight and pregnancy aren't a good combination. There's the risk of high blood pressure – which increases the risk of complications – and of developing gestational diabetes, a kind of temporary diabetes that can emerge in pregnancy and which is becoming more common. The numbers of pregnant women with the condition rose by more than 20 per cent between 2000 and 2006, according to the Australian Institute for Health and Welfare.

"Having a Body Mass Index of 25 to 30 doubles the risk of gestational diabetes, a risk that's tripled in women with a BMI of 30 or more," explains Nankervis who says gestational diabetes not only raises the risk of having diabetes – permanently – further down the track, but can also affect the baby.

"If you have gestational diabetes, the baby is more likely to be large, more likely to need a caesarean or more likely to have jaundice and immature lungs – and these are just the immediate problems. As small children they're more likely to be overweight and as teenagers their risk of being overweight and having glucose intolerance - a risk factor for diabetes - is higher too."

Still, unless you're Victoria Beckham, it's easy to pile on excess baggage in pregnancy, especially when the normal clues that you're gaining extra weight - like 'my jeans are too tight' no longer apply.

Nankervis also believes that it's harder for pregnant women to stay at a healthy weight than it was for previous generations.

'It's harder for the same reasons that it's harder for everyone – because we're less physically active and there's so much high kilojoule food around. It's especially hard for pregnant women who have other children and are working too – they're time poor and more likely to opt for convenience,' she says.

Yet one of the main reasons women put on extra kilos is almost as old as pregnancy itself – the idea of 'eating for two'.

"It's an old wives' tale but it's still widely believed and often supported by partners and families who urge women to eat,' says Tara Diversi of the Dietitians' Association of Australia. "Pregnant women need a nutritious diet – every mouthful should count. But they don't need to eat a lot more - only about an extra 400 kilojoules a day in the first three months which is the equivalent of about 100g of yoghurt and a piece of fruit."

Like Alison Nankervis, Diversi believes women aren't getting enough education about what's a healthy amount of weight to gain in pregnancy.

"In the first three months of pregnancy, it's normal to just gain a couple of kilos and the normal range of weight to gain through the whole pregnancy is 11 to 16kg if your weight is normal and 9-11kg if you're already overweight," she says.

"But when it comes to eating a healthier diet and avoiding excess weight, pregnant women are very motivated to change. In my experience they're really focussed on getting healthy in pregnancy – once they get the right information."

The Dietitians' Association of Australia has a fact sheet on [pregnancy and weight](#)