



The middle ground

When you're in full bloom, knowledge is power. Sarina Lewis explores the pregnancy weighting game.

Photograph: Miles Aldridge

Funny things run through your mind when standing naked, four weeks after giving birth, on a set of scales before a devastatingly handsome French obstetrician. Things like: "Thank God I skipped the camembert and crème brûlée" – especially when he looks over my new mum tum and remarks: "That's great, not much left to lose."

I recently gave birth to my first son in France. Throughout the 40 weeks of pregnancy in my adopted Parisian home, I have had my weight scrutinised by doctors and listened open-mouthed as girlfriends told of obstetricians who had issued edicts to diet and threatened hospitalisation for the apparent misdemeanour of a 15 kilogram gain.

Back in Australia, while the medical system is thankfully less obsessed, most women, by-and-large, are not. It is only for a precious few that pregnancy offers a nine-month reprieve from the tyranny of dieting. For most figure-fretting, thirtysomething, middle-class mums-to-be, the joy of a blooming belly is

dogged by an overarching shadow of body consciousness. While doctors may not be pushing us to the scales, we are doing it to ourselves. "My sister-in-law put on eight kilos her whole pregnancy," says Kate with horror, a currently pregnant friend known for her gorgeous legs, tiny waist and (formerly) easygoing attitude to diet. "I've already gained that and I still have 10 weeks to go!"

Another yummy mummy of two, who swears blind she never weighed herself during her pregnancy, let (smugly) slip how "worried" family and friends would comment on her small gain. "Like a bubble on legs," she crowed.

It is tempting to write off pregnancy weight pressures as yet another curse of a shallow society, but the reality is that excess weight gain is not good for mother or child. A recent research study published in the *American Journal of Obstetrics & Gynecology* by Harvard's Dr Emily Oken discovered that excess maternal weight gain increases by four-fold the likelihood of having an overweight child.

"The more maternal weight gain during the pregnancy, the higher the risk of the child being overweight," says Oken of the study, which followed 1,044 mother-child pairs from conception until the child's third birthday. She says weight gain guidelines set in 1990 by America's Institute of Medicine, which suggest gains of between 11.5 and 16 kilograms for women with a normal pre-pregnancy BMI [of around 20 to 26], as is recommended for Australia's pregnant population, could be too lenient in today's climate of obesity.

"The question is whether the current guidelines are the right guidelines," says Oken. She strongly believes that too much weight gain greatly affects the long-term health outcomes for a mother and child. "It's pretty clear that for overweight or obese women the guidelines are too much. What's not clear is whether they are too much for average women."

So, is it bye-bye craving, hello kilojoule counting? Clearly Milla Jovovich – with her self-confessed Krispy Kreme obsession and gain of more than 32 kilograms – is not Oken's nominee for pregnancy's poster child. Yet, with her reported 10 kilogram pregnancy gain, could Nicole Richie really become a legitimate role model for healthy eating?

The questions raised by such research are anathema to Meredith Nash, a doctoral candidate at Melbourne University's Gender Studies department and the author of *The Baby Bump Project*, a research blog looking at pregnant-body image, celebrity pregnancy and motherhood. She insists that becoming overweight is an every-woman anxiety magnified by pregnancy. "Women are well aware of the fact they need to keep track of the weight they gain in pregnancy ... but the goalposts shift constantly. I think women are absolutely confused and this sort of research is just anxiety-producing."

Health professional Tara Diversi begs to differ. The Dietitians Association of Australia spokesperson says knowledge is power; that watching weight is vital in ensuring a safe pregnancy and a healthy mother and child. And, yes, she says, a 10 kilogram gain can be sufficient if a woman is eating the right nutrients.

While this may require a societal rethink, Oken insists it's a vital message. "The answer ... is not bulimia, anorexia and smoking, but in being active and eating well," Dr Oken explains. It's about stepping back on the scales, she says, in search of the middle ground.

MOTHER LOVE

From left: Annick Goutal Petite Chérie scented candle, \$85; Louise Galvin Sacred Locks shampoo, \$47; Burt's Bees Baby Bee Buttermilk Lotion, \$20.

