



PREGNANCY AND EATING DISORDERS

One of the most important things a woman can do to ensure a healthy pregnancy for herself and her baby is to eat a well-balanced diet. Good nutrition during pregnancy is essential to creating an environment that allows the baby to grow and flourish.

WHAT ARE EATING DISORDERS?

Eating disorders are a group of behaviors fueled by unresolved emotional conflicts whose symptoms are displayed as altered food consumption. These disorders include: anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge eating. Anorexia is characterized by starvation. Bulimia and binge eating are characterized by insatiable cravings for food followed by purging.

WHICH EATING DISORDERS ARE MOST COMMON IN PREGNANT WOMEN?

The most common eating disorders found among pregnant women are anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa.

HOW DO EATING DISORDERS AFFECT FERTILITY?

You may not be able to conceive if you have an eating disorder. Fertility problems are associated with women who are severely underweight, anemic, or vitamin deficient. Women whose body fat falls below a certain level generally stop menstruating and as a result do not ovulate regularly. This problem usually resolves when a woman begins to gain weight. About 80% of women regain their ability to conceive when their eating disorder is successfully treated.

HOW DO EATING DISORDERS AFFECT PREGNANCY?

A pregnant woman suffering from an eating disorder runs the risk of increased miscarriage, incompetent cervix, low amniotic fluid, placenta separation, gestational diabetes, preeclampsia, stillbirth, and complications during labor.

WHAT EFFECT DOES THE MOTHER'S EATING DISORDER HAVE ON THE FETUS?

An unborn child receives all nourishment from the mother. If the mother isn't eating nutritious foods in the proper amounts, the child will suffer from malnutrition, vitamin deficiency, electrolyte imbalance, and dehydration. These conditions result in delayed fetal growth, fetal abnormalities such as cleft palate or cleft lip, low birth weight, jaundice, and higher risk of complications during delivery because of the mother's and baby's weakened states.

HOW DOES PREGNANCY AFFECT WOMEN WITH EATING DISORDERS?

Pregnancy should not be used to treat eating disorders. Some women mistakenly believe that pregnancy will force them to adopt good eating habits. Unfortunately, the accompanying weight gain of pregnancy triggers the compulsion to control food intake and exercise excessively. In addition, pregnancy puts a huge strain on a woman's body. If she is not eating properly she will begin to experience exhaustion and depression. Her teeth and bones may become weakened because the baby's need for calcium takes precedence. If calcium stores are not replenished with dairy products and other sources, a woman could experience stress fractures and broken bones later in life. Once calcium is gone from bones, it is difficult to replace. Also, women with eating disorders are at higher risk of potentially fatal liver, kidney, and cardiac problems. Pregnancy only increases this risk.

HOW MUCH WEIGHT SHOULD A WOMAN EXPECT TO GAIN DURING PREGNANCY?

Each pregnancy is unique, but the normal amount of weight gained is anywhere between 26 and 30 pounds. According to the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, the weight gained during pregnancy can be broken down to: baby - 6 to 8 pounds, placenta - 1 pound, amniotic fluid - 2 pounds, enlarged uterus - 2 pounds, breast growth - 1 to 2 pounds, increased blood - 3 to 4 pounds, increased body fluid - 4 pounds, and maternal stores of fat, protein, and other nutrients - 7 pounds.

HOW DO EATING DISORDERS AFFECT BREASTFEEDING?

Women who plan on breastfeeding their baby must continue their good eating habits. Breast milk is full of vitamins and nutrients that help the baby build its immune system. Also, women who do not consume enough calories while breastfeeding run the risk of not producing enough breast milk to feed their infant.

If you have an eating disorder and are considering becoming pregnant, ask yourself the following questions:

1. How long have you suffered with eating disorders?
2. Are you currently being treated for your eating disorder? How successful is the treatment?
3. How comfortable are you with the changes your body will go through during pregnancy?
4. Are you willing to put the good health of your baby before compulsive eating habits?
5. Will pregnancy only add to the stress in your life, thereby making your eating disorder worse?
6. Are you able to ask for help when you need it?
7. Are you willing to continue good eating habits after the birth of your child in order to maintain the strength needed for motherhood?

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