

BY BRETTE MCWHORTER SEMBER

PART I:
TAKING CARE
OF YOURSELF

+ Plus-Size

If you're overweight, you've probably heard about the effect of those pounds on your health for years. But being plus-sized doesn't mean you can't have a wonderful, healthy pregnancy and a beautiful, healthy baby — what you need is good information and medical care.

Find a Size-Friendly Caregiver

The first thing you can do to ensure that you will feel good about your pregnancy and stay healthy is find a caregiver who is accepting of you and your body shape, and will work with you to help you have the healthiest possible pregnancy. Avoid anyone preachy, accusatory or who simply projects an aura of thinner-than-thou arrogance.

Ann Douglas, author of *The Mother of All Pregnancy Books* and herself a plus-size mother of four, says, "You want someone who will help you to set weight gain goals for yourself, but who won't make you feel like an unfit mother if you happen to gain an extra pound or two one month."

"Size-friendly caregivers give information about possible complications accurately but without judgment, and they work proactively with a woman on prevention without lecturing or shaming," says Pamela Vireday, a childbirth educator in Oregon. "They don't try to impose their agendas and opinions about size issues, but they do offer gentle advice if it is asked for." Vireday knows her subject matter well: she owns and operates Plus-Size-Pregnancy.org and serves as an advocate for expectant big beautiful women ("BBW").

Being size-wise doesn't end there, she says. These caregivers also need to have size-appropriate equipment. "They know that using a regular cuff falsely elevates blood pressure in people of size; they have large blood pressure cuffs and use them automatically. They have gowns that fit and appropriate scales, and go out of their way to help you be comfortable...And always do so respectfully and with caring."

Interview your doctor or midwife at your first appointment (or book a special interview appointment) and ask specific questions about his or her philosophy with regard to your current weight and your future weight gain. Such questions might include:

- Do you consider yourself sensitive to the needs and feelings of larger women?
- What kind of weight gain do you recommend for a large woman during pregnancy?
- Where is the scale located for weigh-ins?
- Does your office have larger-sized gowns and blood pressure cuffs? ▶▶

+Plus-Size

Staying active will help you feel better and control weight gain. This doesn't have to mean doing step aerobics or jogging. "Swimming and prenatal yoga are incredible activities for pregnancy," says Vireday. "Both are especially suited for pregnant women and are size-friendly, too. Both help you relax and go deep into yourself, and have great benefits physically."

New to fitness routines? Lisa Stone, an ACE-certified fitness instructor in Atlanta, Georgia, says to start slowly: Try a 10- to 15-minute moderately-paced walk on flat terrain. "As you start to feel stronger, add time to your walk in five-minute increments, gradually increasing to 45 minutes three to five times per week. Once you can walk that duration comfortably, try adding some low hills into your walking route to add intensity." She adds, "Be sure to take along a bottle of water and take a big swig every 10 to 15 minutes so you stay well hydrated." The March of Dimes in its *Weight Matters* report recommends that overweight women continue being active during pregnancy but avoid activities that create extreme fatigue.

Exercise is important not only for your baby but for your health too. A 1997 study in the *American Journal of Epidemiology* showed that moderate amounts of exercise cut the rate of gestational diabetes in overweight women. The frequency or amount of the exercise wasn't as important as the simple fact that the women engaged in some form of exercise. ACOG (the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists) issued new guidelines in 2001 recommending all pregnant women obtain at least 30 minutes of accumulated exercise on most days. Dr. Nancy S. Green, medical director of the March of Dimes, says, "Overweight women who were previously exercising before pregnancy can continue to do so, unless they have a medical reason not to. Overweight women who want to start exercising during pregnancy are advised to do something easy, like walking, and to build up gradually. However, every pregnant woman should check with her healthcare provider before starting or continuing an exercise program."

Doing simple stretches at home can help make physical activity more comfortable and can help prepare your body for birth. Since every woman is different, and because larger women may have other health- and fitness-related issues to consider (such as ways to avoid joint strain), be sure to talk to your caregiver about what kind of exercise will work best for you.

To a healthy birth

The thought of a hospital stay may be daunting when you consider the prospect of too-small gowns, frequent cervical checks and a variety of nurses, residents and other caregivers in

the hospital setting. Undoubtedly, you will find varying degrees of size-friendliness in personnel and equipment.

What may be particularly intimidating is the idea of showing these strangers what you're made of. "I am thinking about how to deliver this child and not be totally mortified about my weight," admits Long Islander Eileen. "In the Bradley Classes I am attending, they say that on your back is the most unnatural way to deliver a baby. They recommend squatting, in a birthing chair or — God forbid — on all fours. Can you just imagine my big butt there for the world to see? Oh no, I don't think so."

Dr. Shanahan also recommends squatting or knee-chest positions to help open the pelvis. The goal is to help your baby move out by working with your body and with gravity. "I delivered my [third] daughter in the semi-sitting position on the bed. It worked well for me at 323 pounds," says Andrise, a mom in Wisconsin. "I pushed two times in six minutes and delivered a 9-pound, 7-ounce baby with no tears or episiotomy."

Unfortunately, not every plus-size mom will get to have a vaginal birth, as the primary (first-time) cesarean section rate is three times higher in obese women than for their more slender counterparts. "The c-section rate is higher mainly because babies are bigger and are less likely to fit through the birth canal," says Dr. Shanahan. She also notes, "Obese women are more likely to have complications from c-sections, especially increased blood loss and infection."

In general though, plus-size women can have normal, healthy pregnancies and deliveries. Complications are the exception, not the norm. Like any expectant mother, if you take care of yourself and find a caregiver who will work with you, your happy ending is just weeks away. ■

About the author: Brette McWhorter Sember is a former attorney and the author of The Visitation Handbook: Your Complete Guide to Parenting Apart and Repair Your Own Credit and Deal With Debt. She is the mother of two children.

RESOURCES

Find more for you on the Web! Click over to [\[ePregnancy.com/go\]](http://ePregnancy.com/go) and enter the [\[go\]](#) codes shown.

BBW (plus-size) moms message board: [\[go\]](#) 3349

Plus-size fitness tips: [\[go\]](#) 2550

Plus-size pregnancy and caregiver-patient relationships: [\[go\]](#) 2714

Maternity fashion tips for tall women: [\[go\]](#) 827

Plus-size maternity: [\[go\]](#) 786

Next time: Part 2: Feeling Good About Yourself

Over the moon

"Most hospitals have larger gowns for larger patients," says Dr. Shanahan. "When walking around in labor, one gown can be worn open in the back with a second worn like a robe to prevent any unintended mooning."

Hearing the heartbeat

Your caregiver may have some difficulty locating the baby's heartbeat in the early months of pregnancy due to the thickness of the abdomen. Don't panic or be embarrassed if this happens to you. He or she may order an ultrasound to make sure everything is fine — and in all likelihood, it will be.

+ Plus-Size Pregnancy

PART 2:
**FEELING
GOOD** ABOUT
YOUR PLUS-SIZE
PREGNANCY

BY BRETTE MCWHORTER SEMBER

The perfect (and not very realistic) picture of pregnancy in our society is that of a thin woman with a cute basketball stomach. But what if you're not a stick with a bulge — can you still have a healthy, happy pregnancy? The answer is yes! Plus-size women can and do have wonderful pregnancies, but finding the support and resources you need isn't always easy.

YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO **FEEL PROUD** OF THE DIFFICULT JOB YOUR BODY IS PERFORMING AND THE WONDERFUL CHANGES THIS TIME BRINGS.

Coping with other people

"I hated when other people did not know I was pregnant. They were always surprised when I told them," says Angela Kelly of Wooster, Ohio. Many plus-size moms-to-be feel this way.

"It's the hardest when you should be showing — around the fourth or fifth month — but you just look like you've put on more weight," remembers Dawn Mantas, a doula (trained labor and birth support person) in Royal Oak, Michigan. "I've found that rubbing or resting my hands on the mound of my belly gives people the hint that I'm pregnant and not just gaining weight. I've been pregnant and overweight four times now, and my favorite remedy for this problem has been to start wearing maternity clothes as early as possible — during my fourth month, usually. So what if people think I'm eight months along when I'm only five? I suddenly look 'pregnant' and not just 'overweight,' and instead of frowns, I get smiles."

Remember that you will eventually be obviously pregnant. Until then, buy or make a tee shirt that says "Baby on Board" or something similar if you want the world to know! What's important is having a healthy baby and feeling good about yourself. ▶



Plus-Size

Feeling comfortable

The aches and pains of pregnancy can be wearing, and plus-size women sometimes experience more discomfort than others. Wear clothes that are not too tight, and make time during your day for short breaks or an afternoon nap. "Get a pair of comfortable shoes that you can wear throughout your pregnancy — no matter the cost!" suggests Lisa Bahick in Homewood, Illinois.

Try wearing a belly support garment, which can take some of the stress and pressure off your back. "I wore one all through my second pregnancy, and it was a lifesaver," remembers Lee Thompson of Akron, New York.

Make a point of putting your feet up and doing stretches to help stay comfortable. Consider purchasing special pregnancy pillows for between your legs or under your side. "I went to bed armed with a fortress of different pillows," says Thompson. "A big body pillow gave me a way to lift up one leg and support my tummy all at once."

And for a treat, try a prenatal massage. "This is a unique heaven unto itself!" says Pamela Virelay, a childbirth educator in Oregon. "Find a masseuse who specializes in pregnancy massage, and let this be your indulgence. If you cannot afford a professional massage, consider offering to barter something in exchange, or have your partner commit to giving you a regular massage instead."

Not only does it feel wonderful, but it can reduce the aches and pains of pregnancy.

Managing self-esteem

Continuing to feel good about yourself through your pregnancy can be difficult. "I think the worst part was being weighed every month. The numbers kept getting higher and higher," says Lisa Peters of Manassas, Virginia. Remember that you are supposed to gain some weight during pregnancy; talk to your caregiver for specific advice.

"I didn't feel good about myself and I didn't do enough for myself. That was a mistake," remembers Twin Cities, Minnesota, mom Heather Edwards. Do things to help you feel good about your body. Get a manicure, an expensive haircut, top-shelf cosmetics or beautiful bath products. Remember the miracle your body is performing and love it for that.

More tips:

- Make time during your pregnancy to do things that give you pleasure and make you feel good about yourself as a person.

- Nurture your mind and spirit as well as your body.

- Talk to other moms who have had or are going through a plus-size pregnancy. If you don't know anyone in your area, join an online support group, such as the one for plus-size moms at ePregnancy.com.



- Be sure to talk to your partner about your feelings.

- Keep a pregnancy journal to work through your complicated emotions and reflect on this time of change in your life.

- Stay focused on the end result of your pregnancy: a wonderful baby.

- Remember the amazing feat your body is performing.

- Develop your own idea of beauty and celebrate the changes pregnancy brings to your body. Notice the truly beautiful things about it, and keep in mind that full-figured women have been revered at many points in history and are still adored in many cultures.

Finding happiness

Remember that pregnancy will last only a short time; savor it! Above all, you have the right to feel proud of the difficult job your body is performing and the wonderful changes this time brings. Carry your pregnancy with pride and with joy, and know in your heart that you are a beautiful woman. ■

About the author: Bette McWhorter Sember is a former attorney and the mother of two children.

PLUS-SIZE FASHION: LOOKING GREAT AT ANY SIZE

Some women opt to wear regular clothing in larger sizes simply because they are easier to find and less expensive. The downside to this is that they don't help you feel or look pregnant. But a few larger-sized items will get you through that awkward period when your regular clothes are getting snug but maternity clothes look silly.

Finding plus-size maternity wear can be a challenge, but it's definitely worth the effort. "Get maternity clothes that really fit. They are designed to make you look pregnant, not fat," recommends Katherine Muzyczka of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. "It makes a difference in how people treat you and how you feel."

"I had a hard time finding some of the cuter and smarter maternity clothes," reports Lisa Bahick of Homewood, Illinois.

Most mall maternity shops carry sizes only up to 12 or 14, with an occasional XL — not exactly what truly plus moms need. Some stores or online sites advertise that they sell plus-size clothes, but often their stock only goes up to size 2X, if that. Keep looking, though: A wide selection of fashionable plus-size maternity wear is available online and through catalogs.

You'll have to look long and hard to find plus-size maternity pantyhose. Real plus sizes do not exist, so choosing larger-sized regular pantyhose is the only option.

Where to Find Plus-Size Maternity Clothing

Baby Becoming

[www.babybecoming.com]
401-658-0688 or 888-666-6910

Exclusively plus size. Complete line of maternity wear, plus nursing bras, swimwear and baby slings. Up to size 6x.