

Q&A: Researcher discusses changing the pregnancy culture to 'eating for you,' not for two

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Leanne Redman, Ph.D., director of the Reproductive Endocrinology and Women's Health Laboratory at Pennington Biomedical. Credit: Pennington Biomedical Research Center

For many generations, society has embraced the idea that pregnant women are "eating for two." That adage is frequently invoked as mothers-to-be are encouraged to abandon diets and overindulge in every food craving in the name of nutrition.

It might have been sound advice back in the 1950s. Back then, only 1 in 10 women was dealing with health issues related to being overweight. But times have changed.

As a world leader in nutrition, LSU's Pennington Biomedical Research Center scientists have studied prenatal nutrition and discovered eating-for-two is no longer a good mantra for modern moms.

"Pregnancy is a unique event that influences the [future health](#) of both mothers and babies," said Leanne Redman, Ph.D., director of the Reproductive Endocrinology and Women's Health Laboratory at Pennington Biomedical. "Since the 1990s, research has shown the amount of excess weight a woman gains throughout pregnancy contributes to new obesity or worsening of existing obesity and increases the risk of poor and often dangerous pregnancy and birth outcomes."

In addition, a mother's weight status at the time of pregnancy and her weight gain has a big influence on the future weight gain and obesity of her child. The National Academy of Medicine makes it easy for moms and physicians to follow a color-coded system yet, despite these efforts, the eating-for-two myth persists.

As both a researcher and the mother of five children, Redman understands both the importance and the challenges of maintaining a healthy weight during pregnancy.

Based on both her research and personal experience, she offers answers to some of the most common questions about healthy pre-natal weight

gain.

How much weight should you gain in pregnancy?

In 2009, the National Academy of Medicine [published a guideline](#) regarding how much weight you should gain during pregnancy.

To interpret the weight gain guidelines, identify your [body mass index](#) (BMI) group. BMI is a simple calculation health care providers use to understand health risks. To calculate your current BMI, visit [this link](#).

To figure out your ideal pregnancy weight gain, enter your weight at the time you became pregnant and your height. Once the calculator determines your BMI, look at the chart to determine your recommended pregnancy weight gain.

If your pre-pregnancy BMI puts you in the normal weight category, follow the green zone for healthy gestational weight gain. If you're in the overweight category, follow the orange zone instructions to keep your weight in the healthy range.

For example, a newly pregnant women with a BMI of 27.5 falls into the overweight category. Her advised weight gain is a total of 15 to 25 pounds or 0.5-0.7 pounds per week.

Though these recommendations have been published for nearly a decade, many women are unaware they exist.

If you add three 300-calorie snacks to a typical pregnancy diet, it is quite easy to rack up an additional 900 calories a day.

In addition, calorie-dense foods with high sugar and fat content are readily available—at the grocery store, the office snack machine, family

dinners and a million other places—making it harder to manage gestational weight gain.

For mothers living with obesity, their weight gain recommendation is even smaller at 11 to 20 pounds or less than 0.5 pounds per week. It's no surprise nearly half of all [pregnant women](#) in the U.S. exceed the Institute of Medicine's pregnancy guidelines.

Dr. Redman's work at Pennigton Biomedical was the first to show that for pregnant mothers to gain less than 0.5 pound per week, they need not increase their calories in pregnancy at all. They should focus instead on adding more fruits and vegetables and reducing sugar, salt and fat.

Also, if mothers are hungry, the best strategy is to keep small portions of protein-rich foods such as yogurt, protein shakes or bars, a boiled egg or whole grain snacks on hand to curb appetite and quell cravings.

How can you stop unwanted weight from sneaking up on you?

Besides eating healthy and exercising regularly, many large clinical trials have shown the easiest and best tool for successful [weight gain](#) is self-monitoring.

Rather than being intimidated, make friends with your scale and pedometer. Women who track their progress—by counting calories, steps or weight gained—are the most successful at managing body weight.

Provided by Louisiana State University

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