

Planning for the Pregnant Body

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Pregnancy is a time of great change and the focal point of much of this change is the woman's body. It is a time when we as women must renegotiate both our relationship with our bodies and our relationship with the outside world. This normal developmental task is challenging to many women and may be especially stressful to those who were uncomfortable with their bodies at the outset.

Cultural view of pregnant bodies

As much as we may wish it were not so, our society continues to overvalue women's appearance at the expense of other attributes. The rounded "earth mother" image denoted by obvious hips and breasts and a large abdomen is antithetical to the thin, muscular, "boyish" shape, which is currently in vogue. Consequently the "earth mother" shape is devalued even though it is a more accurate portrayal of reality for most of us. Pregnancy pushes this "earth mother" shape to its natural extreme: bulbous breasts and a huge ripe belly that refuses to be camouflaged.

If we apply the cultural yardstick, which has governed our lives until now, we may feel big and unattractive. If we misconstrue our increased volume as fat, we are guaranteed to feel even worse. There is a societal caveat that states that the sanctity of motherhood excuses us from the everyday expectations of women. We are no longer viewed as sex objects, but as asexual mother objects. We are valued now for the life within us. We have been removed from the race to look good. Depending on our usual inclinations, this may leave a small or large void in our lives. We may wonder whether our partners still find us attractive. We may wonder if they will seek sexual satisfaction elsewhere.

Rapid physical changes

Over the course of pregnancy our bodies change more rapidly than at any other time in our lives. Many of us experience a perceptual lag with respect to our ballooning bellies; we may underestimate our dimensions and find ourselves bumping into furniture or doorways. We may start to feel slow and heavy and it may take us longer to get to places. We may feel more vulnerable and less able to protect ourselves in threatening situations; even riding on a crowded subway may seem dangerous. In later pregnancy our skin may feel like an over-inflated balloon ready to burst open at any moment. Our enlarged breasts may be construed as an emblem of sexuality. Together these changes may make us feel like inhabitants of a foreign environment. These changes are all normal for a pregnant woman, but they may not feel normal because they are outside our usual experience.

Issues of control and change

Issues related to control over our bodies may be amplified during pregnancy. We may feel that we are in control if we conceive when we want to, and we may feel out of control if we conceive by accident, or as the result of coercion, or if we do not conceive when we want to.

Once conception occurs, we may feel anxious or frightened by the biological process that has been set in motion. While feeling the baby move and kick inside us may be a unique and thrilling experience, it also provides concrete evidence that there is life inside us which, barring drastic measures, is not under our control. We may have a difficult pregnancy or an easy one; the choice for the most part will not be ours. We know that we should feed ourselves well and limit our use of caffeine, alcohol, tobacco and medication “for the sake of the baby.” We should not attempt to lose weight. There is undeniable evidence that these things are important to the health of the baby. However, accommodating the baby’s needs may mean subjugating our own wants and this may be difficult for some of us. For a woman who has spent much of her life striving toward a thin figure to accept an unspecified weight gain in the range of 25 to 40 lbs. (11-19 kg – exact amount to be determined by her body) can require a great deal of courage. Everyone knows pregnancy is a temporary state, but many fear that the weight gain and stretch marks will not be.

At some point in the midst of these personal adjustments, the pregnancy begins to announce itself to anyone who cares to look. Ready or not, we have just become the object of public attention. Total strangers may feel free to query the intimate details of our health, offer unsolicited advice and touch our bellies without asking permission. While some women may enjoy this kind of attention, others view it as an invasion of privacy. In either case, people are treating us differently and another aspect of our lives has changed.

Approaches to the birthing experience

Good prenatal health care is important and for many women a physician performs this function. Approaches vary widely and have a strong effect on how we experience our pregnancy. At one extreme are doctors who treat us like objects that need to be poked at and weighed at regular intervals. They may give us the impression that their job is to check for problems. When the baby is ready to be born they may expect to cut, purge and anaesthetize our bodies (e.g., episiotomies, enema and epidural) without necessarily discussing these choices ahead of time. At the other end of the spectrum are doctors and midwives who aim to help us proudly grow big healthy bellies and produce healthy babies. They may give us the impression that their job is to educate and inform us about good nutrition and a healthy lifestyle and help us to monitor our developing child. They will view the birth experience as belonging to us and see themselves as collaborators in the decision-making process. Although prenatal care resources are limited in many areas

of the country, whenever possible it is important to choose a practitioner who will promote positive feelings about the whole process.

After the birth

The weeks following the birth can be an exciting and busy time. The “baby shock” with which the parents are learning to deal may also include some “body shock” for the new mother. Many of us are surprised to learn that the TV image of a new mother who looks exactly like her slim, relaxed and well made-up pre-pregnant self only works for those who give birth to polyester stuffing. With clothes on, real women look about 5 months pregnant. Without clothes, we look a bit like someone let the air out of our balloon.

Over the following months, our bellies gradually shrink and we gradually lose weight. Certainly some of us can squeeze into our old jeans after 8-10 weeks, but many of us cannot. This is the time for patience. We have participated in the miracle of creating new life. Our bodies have undergone enormous changes. We need a break.

Breast milk is now considered the best form of nourishment for infants, provided it comes from a well-nourished mother. Breastfeeding, however, raises new issues about our relationship with our bodies. This very intimate act requires that at least one other person (i.e., the baby) be allowed frequent close contact with our breasts. If we are not to be homebound we must find a way to nurse the baby in public places without exceeding whatever level of exposure is comfortable for us. Concerns about the reliability and trustworthiness of our bodies may be highlighted. Can we really manufacture sufficient milk for the baby? How do we know if the baby is getting the right amount? Women who have had trouble allowing their own nourishment to be controlled by biological cues may find this especially difficult. Whatever feelings we have and whatever choices we make about breastfeeding, we may have to contend with family members and friends who disagree with us. They may be our breasts, but others often feel entitled to tell us how they should be used.

Remembering the important things in life

This article has focused on some of the challenges that being pregnant create for women and our relationships with our bodies. Increasing awareness of these issues may help us prepare to deal with them in a healthy way. There is, of course, another side to all of this – one that needs no preparation. Words cannot adequately describe the multi-faceted, wondrous feeling of carrying a new life inside one’s own body. With the pressures of everyday living, sometimes we may forget what is important in life.

Suggested Reading

Kitzinger, S. 1986. *The Complete Book of Pregnancy and Childbirth*. N.Y.: Alfred A. Knopf.

Baldwin, R. 1986. *Special Delivery: The Choices are Yours*. Berkeley, CA: Celestial Arts.

Leach, P. 1985. *Your Baby and Child: From Birth to Age Five*. N.Y.: Alfred A. Knopf.

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