

Pregnancy, Body Image and Eating Disorders



How does pregnancy affect body image and eating disorders?

Pregnancy and having a baby are periods of big life and physical changes - for some it can be a joyful time, and even improve their relationship with their body, but for many it can increase current or previous eating disorders and body image concerns, as well as being a trigger for the development of an eating disorder for the first time.

44%

of women who experience pregnancy or giving birth experience body image issues¹.

Around 7.5%

of pregnant women experience an eating disorder².

“ While I enjoyed being pregnant, I found it impossible to come to terms with the changes to my body after giving birth. It brought back so many of my old eating disorder feelings and voices in my head.”

Before falling pregnant

Eating disorders and disordered eating can lead to absent or irregular periods which can affect fertility.

It is highly recommended to be in recovery from an eating disorder before becoming pregnant, as bodies require additional energy and nutrients for pregnancy, birth recovery and breastfeeding. See our [tip sheet for fertility issues here](#).



During pregnancy

Changes that occur during pregnancy – food aversions or cravings, morning sickness and weight gain, along with limits on the type and amount of exercise that is possible - can negatively impact people's relationships with their bodies and food. It is important to seek help if you experience any disordered eating or eating disorder symptoms during pregnancy, as it can result in increased medical risks for both mother and baby.

Others may experience a reduction in eating disorder symptoms during pregnancy, as they move towards appreciating what their body can do, rather than what it looks like alone. With the right support, this can be a helpful insight into what recovery can be like. Make the most of this opportunity by linking in with specialist mental health support to help you harness it.

Post-partum

Some women with eating disorders are affected by postnatal depression and anxiety. There is often immense societal pressure on women to lose their pregnancy weight as quickly as possible after birth, which can trigger eating disorder and disordered eating behaviours. The guise of "bouncing back" may mask the return of eating disorder symptoms if these reduced in pregnancy.



Tips to help support your body image during pregnancy and post-partum:

Communicate with your care team

Tell your midwife or doctor about any previous history or concerns around body image, disordered eating or eating disorders. They can provide you with referrals to an accredited practicing dietitian and psychologists with experience working with eating disorders and body image concerns.

Learn about pregnancy and birth

To reduce anxiety and foster a sense of control, ask your healthcare professionals to prepare you for changes that will happen to your body during and after pregnancy.

Manage toxic pressures

Avoid unrealistic expectations of how you should look during pregnancy or 'bouncing back' afterwards. Curate your social media feed so you're not following people that make you feel bad about how you look, work on taking a body neutral approach where you view your body with kindness and focus on the moments of joy with your baby.

Reconnect with your values

Reflect on what's most important to you outside of appearance – this might be family, integrity, safety, joyfulness, health, and connection. Anchoring yourself to your core values can assist in the immense transition that is the journey to parenthood.

Connect with others

Reading blogs, listening to podcasts or following people on social media with experiences of pregnancy and eating disorders or body image concerns can help you feel empowered, supported and not alone.

Reach out for help

Whether it's letting friends and family know how you're feeling, asking people to help you with practical tasks, giving you some personal time to take care of yourself – talking helps.

Get support



Call Butterfly National Helpline

1800 ED HOPE (1800 33 4673)
or visit [Butterfly.org.au](https://butterfly.org.au) to chat online or email,
7 days a week, 8am-midnight (AEST/AEDT).



Learn More

Visit PANDA to find out more about wellbeing around pregnancy panda.org.au



Resources

Read stories of lived experience and find useful resources at [Butterfly.org.au/women](https://butterfly.org.au/women)

References

- 1 Liptember Foundation, 2024. Uncovering the reality: examining multi-dimensional aspects of women's mental health in Australia, 2024.
- 2 Martínez-Olcina M, Rubio-Arias JA, Reche-García C, Leyva-Vela B, Hernández-García M, Hernández-Morante JJ, Martínez-Rodríguez A. Eating Disorders in Pregnant and Breastfeeding Women: A Systematic Review. Medicina (Kaunas). 2020 July