

# HEALTHY WEIGHT, HEALTHY BABIES

**Many mothers-to-be are aware that being overweight or obese is bad for their health, but they may not know that it can also threaten the health of their unborn child. Research led by Dr. Sarah D. McDonald from McMaster University has shown that overweight and obese women who become pregnant have an increased risk for premature delivery.**

**D**r. McDonald and colleagues analyzed data from 84 studies involving over a million women. They explored the relationship between the mother's body weight immediately before becoming pregnant and her risk of preterm birth, defined as birth before 37 weeks' gestation (the normal gestation period for humans is 40 weeks) and/or having a child with a low birth weight.

*"Overweight and obesity are now the most common conditions complicating pregnancy in most developed countries, including Canada, and they are creeping up in some developing countries," says Dr. McDonald. "Prematurity and low birth weight are the two factors that are most predictive of death or illness in infants and illness right through childhood."*

## OVERWEIGHT INCREASES RISK OF PRETERM BIRTH

Overweight or obese women face about a 30% increased risk of their labour being medically induced prematurely. Induction is often performed because continuing the pregnancy is risky for the mother's or baby's health. The heavier the woman, the greater her risk of having labour induced earlier than 37 weeks. Similarly, the heavier the woman, the higher her risk of delivering earlier than 32 weeks, meaning the baby would be severely preterm and at higher risk for illness, disability and even death. Thus, if women can decrease their weight somewhat, even if it's not down to the normal range, they may be able to have healthier babies.

The studies evaluated by Dr. McDonald came from both the developed and developing worlds, and there were some interesting



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differences between the two. *"When we looked at low birth weight in the developed world, we found that women were not protected from having a low birth weight baby by being overweight or obese," says Dr. McDonald. "But in developing countries there was about a 40% decrease in the risk of having a low birth weight baby."*

It's not clear why this is so. Dr. McDonald speculates that *"it may be that in the developed and the developing world, being overweight and obese mean different things. So, in the developing world it might mean you can afford to eat all you need and more. In the developed world, however, it may mean you're stuck eating more low-cost, calorie-dense, nutritionally-poor 'junk food'."*

## CALL TO CURB OBESITY

The findings provide yet more incentive to combat obesity at a personal and societal

level. *"In Canada now, the obesity rate among women of reproductive age is as high as 25% depending on the area and the province," says Dr. B. Anthony Armson, an expert in maternal obesity at Dalhousie University. "Overweight and obesity in our society can start in utero, so we need to intervene somewhere. Pregnancy is a very important time to start to make some behavioural adjustments and changes in lifestyle because pregnant women are very receptive to trying to do the best for themselves and their babies. These women need to be seen by a nutritionist, and they should be educated about what is the appropriate weight gain during pregnancy for someone who is already overweight. It's a nine-month window of opportunity to try to bring about some change."* 🍏🍏

**BY ALISON PALKHIVALA**