

LIFE

Good nutrition is important for healthy pregnancy

Q Why do so many women experience food cravings during pregnancy? Is it okay to enjoy the foods I crave from time to time? Will it affect the health of me and my growing baby? CC, Greenville

A You have probably heard silly, embarrassing and serious stories about pregnancy cravings. Having a better understanding of our changing bodies and our health needs during pregnancy is important. Samantha Malone, a fourth-year Brody medical student, spent time with Kay Craven and her nutrition team at ECU Health Family Medicine and wanted to answer your question. Here is what she wants you to know.

Good nutrition during pregnancy is important as your body responds to the increasing energy needs of you and your growing baby. A variety of foods are necessary to meet those needs.

As you noted, many women experience specific food cravings during pregnancy and may choose to eat those foods more frequently than other foods. Studies suggest that up to 9 out of 10 U.S. women experience cravings for specific foods during pregnancy,



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commonly fruits, chocolate, desserts, pickles, pizza and fast foods. If it's a healthy food, great. If it's a high-fat or salty food with few nutrients, experts tell us that it might be better to enjoy them only occasionally. If you have cravings that lead you to gain too much weight too fast, be sure to talk with your doctor or registered dietitian nutritionist about it.

Theories abound as to why pregnant women develop highly specific food cravings. Early studies suggested that changes in hormone levels during pregnancy were responsible for cravings, but more research is needed to support this idea. However, we do understand that hormones play a role in your sensory perception, meaning that your hormones can change your experiences with taste and smell.

It is very possible that fluctuations in hormones could be partially responsible for changes in food preferences during preg-

nancy — both cravings and aversions. Other theories suggest that cravings may be related to increasing nutritional needs during pregnancy. While there may be some truth to this, many pregnant women seem to crave calorie-dense, high-fat foods which aren't always very nutritious.

Additionally, cravings tend to begin in the first trimester and peak in the second, which doesn't correspond with increasing nutritional demands of the growing baby in the second half of pregnancy. There is evidence that social and cultural factors influence what types of foods women crave.

Interestingly, chocolate is the most commonly reported food craving in the U.S., while rice is a widely craved food in Japan. In cultures where certain foods are labeled as "bad" or "unhealthy," restricting those foods, like chocolate, may actually lead to increased cravings and lead to over-eating. At this point, there is conflicting research regarding how these food cravings actually impact overall health and calorie intake. Either way, it's important to make healthy choices during pregnancy and know how much extra nutrition a

woman actually needs.

We know that the amount of weight a woman gains throughout pregnancy can impact health outcomes for both the mother and baby. For example, too much weight gain in pregnancy has been associated with difficulty losing weight after delivery and future metabolic conditions such as insulin resistance and diabetes. Obesity during pregnancy increases the risk of many health problems, including high blood pressure, pre-eclampsia, gestational diabetes and sleep apnea.

The growing baby is also at risk for complications related to growing too large or not growing enough. A high birth weight increases the risk of injury during delivery and increases the risk of cesarean birth. Long-term, it may put the baby at risk for things like childhood obesity. The Institute of Medicine guidelines provide specific recommendations for weight gain in pregnancy based on a woman's BMI when pregnancy begins. Check with your doctor about weight-gain recommendations for your individual pregnancy and consider talking with your doctor or a registered dietitian nutritionist about a

plan for your healthy eating and weight gain during pregnancy.

To stay within the goal range for weight gain, you may wonder how many additional calories you need to consume. Spoiler — the concept of "eating for two" is incorrect! During the first trimester, no extra calories are needed to support the pregnancy. During the second trimester, a pregnant woman needs an additional 340 calories per day. During the third trimester, this increases to 450 calories per day. This is about one pound per week of weight

gain in the second and third trimesters. An easy way to incorporate these extra calories is by keeping quick, healthy snacks on hand, such as nuts, fruit, or yogurt. Remember — cravings are normal and common, but it's best to enjoy these foods and beverages within your calorie budget.

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Lifestyle changes can ease arm numbness at night

Q My arms and hands have begun to go numb when I'm in lying down in bed at night. It wakes me up, so I'm not sleeping well. What causes this? I'm healthy, eat a pescatarian diet and exercise regularly. I don't have diabetes, but I may have high blood sugar. Should I see a doctor?

A When our ancient ancestors began to walk upright, they earned us some important evolutionary advantages. These include increased agility, improved endurance and freeing up our arms and hands to carry loads and manage tasks. The vertical stance led to increased flexibility of our spines and a remarkable range of motion in our joints. It increased our odds of survival, but it also came at a price.

Becoming bipeds left us more vulnerable to the effects of gravity and, thus, to a host of back and other skeletal problems. It's a risk that persists even in sleep. When the skeletal muscles relax, the pull of gravity takes over. This results in sustained, and often uneven, pressure on the joints and connective tissue of the shoulders, legs and hips. Depending on variables such as someone's age, weight, skeletal structure, general health and fitness and existing injuries, this can have an adverse effect on the nerves involved in motion and sensation.

One area that turns out to be particularly susceptible is the cervical spine. This is the series of seven vertebrae that support the head and neck. They also play host to a bundle of interconnected nerves known as the brachial plexus. These nerves branch into the upper torso and control motion and provide sensation to the arms, wrists, hands and fingers. If any of these nerves get compressed, damaged or lack for oxygen and nutrients, it can cause tingling, a pins-and-needles feeling or numbness. It can also result in muscle weakness.

Compression can arise from something as simple and reversible as poor physical positioning. A number of conditions can play a role, as well. This includes stenosis, which is a narrowing of the spinal column; arthritis; carpal tunnel syndrome; repeti-



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tive stress; degenerative diseases; infection; and physical injuries. Tingling and numbness can also arise due to damage to the nerves themselves, whether from illness or injury. This is known as neuropathy. Your mention of possibly having high blood sugar is also very important, as it is a risk factor for neuropathy.

Lifestyle changes can be effective. Begin by

assessing your sleep habits and environment. Proper support from a mattress and pillow will ease potential pressure points in the head, neck and upper torso. Avoid lying with your arm under the pillow or stretched overhead, as this can compress nerves. A wrist brace can add stability during sleep.

With your combination of high blood sugar and persistent numbness, it's wise to discuss these symptoms with your doctor. Blood sugar management is crucial to good health, and your doctor can help you get yours under control. Your doctor may also suggest certain blood tests or scans that can help pinpoint the potential sources of this nighttime numbness.

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