



[Home](#) > [Pregnancy](#) > [Plus-Size and Pregnant](#)

Finding a size-friendly healthcare provider

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By **Heather Boerner**

When Mechelle Lehman got pregnant for the first time three years ago, she had just moved to a new town and didn't know anyone. She also didn't have an obstetrician. She started her search and hunkered down for a fight.

"I've never had good luck with doctors," she says. "When I got pregnant, I was expecting [the doctor hunt] to be bad."

Lehman, a mom of two in DeKalb, Illinois, has been plus-size her whole life — between a size 16 and a size 24 — and knows how rude some doctors and nurses can be about weight. They weigh you in the middle of the hallway and tsk-tsk when they read your weight. They lecture you about weight loss even if you're just there for a sore throat.

And they make assumptions about your eating habits and lifestyle based on your weight. Lehman, for instance, is a vegetarian, but as a plus-size woman, her healthcare providers often assume she eats massive quantities of hamburgers and steaks. It's gotten to the point where she only goes to the doctor when she has to.

A common problem

Unfortunately, Lehman is far from unique when it comes to her distaste for doctors. A 2005 study published in the *American Journal of Public Health* found that women who are considered medically overweight (with a body mass index of 25 or more) are less likely to have routine cervical and breast cancer screenings regardless of their income, age, or health coverage.

Another study, released the same year in the *International Journal of Obesity*, offered a reason: Women like Lehman feel such a strong anti-fat stigma from their medical professionals that they stop going to the doctor.

"Some physicians don't feel comfortable with plus-size moms. They're afraid," says Brette McWhorter Sember, a plus-size mother of two and author of *Your Plus-Size Pregnancy*.

So what's a plus-size woman to do when she finds out she's pregnant and wants to have the healthiest baby possible? If you're like Lehman, you audition doctors the way you'd test-drive a car. As someone who's moved around a lot, Lehman has had more than her share of experiences with doctors, and she knows it's possible to find great ones.

"I know medical professionals *can* have a good bedside manner," she says. "I figure they know I'm overweight. I know I'm overweight. Don't treat me like a leper."

The importance of finding the right healthcare provider

Pregnancy creates its fair share of stress around tests, vitamins, food restrictions, and the rest, but get the right healthcare provider, and your stress level may decrease, says Sember. A good provider will note your weight during pregnancy and occasionally talk about it — it's necessary as your baby grows. And a good provider can monitor your risk factors, based on family and personal history, but without harping on weight, she adds.

Finding the right doctor is key during pregnancy, says Sujatha Reddy, an ob-gyn in Atlanta. "A more relaxed approach is best for most women. If there are problems, you want the doctor to help, but you don't want to constantly be

worrying that you've gained one too many pounds," she says.

"The line I always use is, 'This is not about you looking like Britney Spears. It's about being healthy,'" says Reddy. "There's no reason to stay with a doctor you don't connect with. You form a relationship with a doctor just like you do with anyone else."

Consider a midwife

Jennifer Mountain, a real estate contractor and mother of two in Haslet, Texas, had a first pregnancy that was free of complications. It was made all the easier because her midwives were so supportive of her ability to have a healthy baby at 5 feet 5 inches and 245 pounds. But that didn't happen by accident. After too many doctors lectured her about weight loss when she came in with the flu, she's learned to be up-front and picky about her doctors in all cases, including her obstetrician.

"I don't make any bones about the fact that I don't want to hear [medical professionals] say anything negative about my weight," she says. "I'm very clear that they aren't going to deliver my baby. I'm going to deliver the baby. I'm the mom. They are there to deal with any medical issues that come up. I'm choosing them and making them work for me."

For Lehman, it took two tries to find a good doctor for her first pregnancy. Her first doctor "didn't have a very caring attitude." So she looked around again. Luckily, the wife of one of her husband's co-workers had just had a great experience with an obstetrician. He was two hours from her home, but Lehman was willing to travel to have a great pregnancy. She did: In 2003, she gave birth to Mallora, a healthy baby girl.

Her second pregnancy in 2005-2006 yielded the same doctor drama. She and her husband had just moved again. She had heard good things about one doctor, so she made an appointment. Unfortunately, she never met the doctor. She did meet the nurse-practitioner and the nurses — and the nurses sealed her decision to leave.

"The nurse-practitioner was nice, but the nurses were horrible in the way they talked to me, in the comments they made when I got on the scale," she recalls. "I'm overweight. I know that. You don't have to make a big deal about the fact that you have to move the scale over another 100 pounds."

How to find a healthcare provider you like

Do you need help finding a great doctor? Follow these tips from our experts — and moms who've been there:

- **Stick together.** Ask other plus-size moms in your area for recommendations for size-friendly obstetricians. They'll have the inside line on practices that offer great care for plus-size moms — and those that don't.
- **Gauge experience.** Before you make an appointment at a new practice, ask whether the doctor and nursing staff have experience working with plus-size moms. If the doctor has never done, say, a c-section on a plus-size mom, you don't want to be his first.
- **Case the joint.** Does the practice have gowns large enough to fit you and large-size blood pressure cuffs? That's a sign of a practice that's welcoming to plus-size women.
- **Trust your gut.** Watch how the doctor and his staff talk to you. Do they use a condescending tone? Knowing that your doctor will want to talk to you about weight as your baby grows, see if the way he does it is sensitive and nonjudgmental.
- **Consider a midwife.** Many plus-size women have good experiences with midwives who don't instantly see their weight as a medical problem. "I felt defective in my doctor's office, like my pregnancy was a ticking time bomb, but my midwife never made a fuss about my weight — she trusted my body to be able to do what it's designed for," says Emily James, an architect and mother of two in Bergen, New Jersey.

How to leave a healthcare provider you don't like

If you decide your doctor doesn't measure up, you can always leave. Consider these tips from Sember and moms who've made the switch:

- **Get a second opinion.** Before you notify your doctor that you're leaving, Sember recommends you tell your insurance company you need a second opinion and then start auditioning different doctors. That way, there's never a gap in your care.
- **Time it right.** Get prenatal care early, so that if you decide to make a change, you can do it before the end of the first trimester, notes Sember. After that, some doctors will be hesitant to take you.

- **Plan your exit based on comfort level.** The way you leave the practice depends on what you feel comfortable doing. Lehman told the nurse-practitioner in her second pregnancy to say, "I don't think this is going to work out." You can also secure a new ob-gyn and have your records transferred without any explanation. Some women want their former doctor to know why they're leaving and so write a letter or tell their doctor directly. Do what feels right for you.
- **Remember: You don't have to explain.** You don't need your ob-gyn's permission, either. You also don't have to tell your new doctor why you're changing. Simply follow the above advice to find a doctor who fits your criteria. Then have a great pregnancy!

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