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Having a positive plus-size pregnancy

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By Heather Boerner

When Adrienne Erazo, a researcher at a newspaper in Orange, California, got pregnant the first time, the excitement over building her family was immediate and profound. As her baby started to grow, she felt a sense of purpose, like this was what she was supposed to do her whole life. But hanging over that joy was a pall of doubt and shame: Was she doing something wrong? Was she hurting her baby?

She wasn't drinking alcohol, smoking, or taking drugs — she was simply overweight, a size 22W at 5 feet 4 inches tall. She'd been overweight most of her life.

She kept hearing the concerned voices of her husband and family telling her, months earlier, that she should really "get her weight under control" before she got pregnant. She kept thinking about all the warnings she'd read in the news about plus-size women having gestational diabetes and their babies having birth defects.

"When I got pregnant, at first I was sad because I was so worried," says the 27-year-old. "I should have been happy." Unfortunately, Erazo's not alone.

Guidelines from the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists urge healthcare professionals to counsel plus-size women to lose weight before pregnancy, limit weight gain during pregnancy, and lose baby weight quickly after pregnancy. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ranks being overweight or obese during pregnancy nearly at the same risk level as uncontrolled high blood pressure, diabetes, smoking, or drinking.

With all the warnings out there about how dangerous it is to be overweight — and the phrase "obesity epidemic" appearing regularly in the news — it's no surprise that women like Erazo feel anxious and guilty about their pregnancies and spend at least part of the time feeling bad about themselves.

A more positive outlook

Luckily for Erazo and countless other plus-size women, the truth is not nearly so frightening. After nine months of a complication-free pregnancy, Erazo gave birth to Orion, a 9-pound baby boy with soft brown hair and his daddy's chocolate brown eyes.

Now pregnant with her second child, Erazo wants you to know something: "I'm fat and pregnant and I'm just fine," she says simply. "It's important for other moms to know that you're not a bad mom and you won't be a bad mom just because you're plus-size."

In fact, if you're a plus-size woman, you're part of a growing sorority. Today, one in three pregnant women is considered obese — having a body mass index (BMI) of 30 or more. And half of women of childbearing age are considered overweight — having a BMI of 25 to 29.9. (You can [calculate your BMI here](#).) And while plus-size women face [increased risks of complications](#), the majority of these are manageable if they occur, and being overweight doesn't mean you're destined for a troubled pregnancy.

"Most plus-size women have completely normal pregnancies and normal babies. We're currently making a lot of fuss about maternal size. This only magnifies the risks and scares women," says Cornelia van der Ziel, a clinical instructor

in obstetrics at Harvard Medical School and an ob-gyn in private practice.

"The odds are, plus-size women are going to have healthy pregnancies," says Brette McWhorter Sember, a mom of two and coauthor of *Your Plus-Size Pregnancy*. "The odds often sound like they're against plus-size women, but the truth is that you're most likely to have a perfectly healthy pregnancy, nothing wrong with the baby, and a wonderful delivery. It doesn't have to be that big of a deal."

As the women profiled below can attest, your weight truly doesn't have to be that big of a deal — and it *is* possible to have a healthy pregnancy and healthy baby.

Adrienne: Overcoming gestational diabetes

Erazo and her husband, Marcelo, decided to try for a second baby on her husband's birthday. Two weeks later, she was pregnant. They were thrilled and were hoping this pregnancy would also be complication-free. This time, however, Erazo developed gestational diabetes. You can hear the edge of tension in her voice as she talks about the future and worries about her baby being affected by gestational diabetes.

She doesn't know what will happen, of course, with the delivery or the baby's health, but she's trying not to blame herself. Instead, she's focusing on approaching food in a different way. Rather than interpreting her gestational diabetes diagnosis as a sentence or a judgment of herself as a plus-size woman, she's being positive and embracing a new, healthier way of eating. She feels better already.

"This pregnancy is completely different," she says. "It's a really positive experience because of all the realizations I've been making about how I eat and how this diet makes me feel. I feel healthier." She adds, "I truly believe that I'll eat this way the rest of my life."

She loves her body when she's pregnant — a shift she didn't expect. She spent many years hiding her body from people, overwhelmed by the negative attention her large size sometimes attracted. She sucked in her stomach. She hid behind baggy clothes. But being pregnant, she says, makes her feel beautiful, even sexy.

"I'm so proud of my belly," she says. "It's okay for me to be big for once, because I'm pregnant. Plus, I just feel so special when I'm pregnant. The fact that I can grow this beautiful being inside my body is a blessing. I feel like I have a purpose."



Adrienne Erazo and Meissa

Amie: Complication-free pregnancy

When Amie Blasi got pregnant in 2004, it was a surprise. A pet store employee in Lakeland, Florida, Blasi was finalizing a divorce from her first husband and making plans for the future with her fiancé, Nathaniel. Her first hint that she was pregnant came while she was at work. "I was cleaning a cage out after a mess, and the smell made me sick to my stomach," she recalls. "It had never really bothered me before, and I was sick the rest of the day. I just suspected it was because I was pregnant."



Amie Blasi and Lily

As soon as she learned she was carrying a baby, she worried she was hurting her baby by being overweight. At 5 feet 5 inches with long red hair down her back, the 27-year-old Blasi weighs about 280 pounds today and is a stay-at-home mom. Before getting pregnant, she had lost 60 pounds and was down to a size 22, but the weight loss didn't loosen the grip of her fears.

As it turned out, everything was fine: After a complication-free pregnancy and a simple delivery, she gave birth to a healthy baby girl with fuzzy ears and a dark patch of hair on her head that, she recalls, "was as soft as a kitten." She weighed in at 8 pounds, 13 ounces, and has her mom's eye shape and her daddy's dark brown eye color.

Mechelle: Moving past negativity

Mechelle Lehman was taking a break from getting her degree in secondary education when she found out she was pregnant the first time. She and her husband, Jon, had just moved to a new town. She says she worried briefly about her weight affecting her pregnancy. Instead, her pregnancy was easy. But that didn't stop the occasional negative comments about her weight from strangers and acquaintances.

Lehman, now a 28-year-old stay-at-home mom of two in DeKalb, Illinois, stands 5 feet 6 inches tall and vacillates between a size 16 and a size 24. During her pregnancies,



she says, people couldn't tell she was pregnant until she was quite far along. "I didn't change too much during my pregnancies," she says. "The only difference was that my large hourglass shape — which I call an infinity glass! — turned a little bumpier around the middle." **Mechelle Lehman with Mallora and Thorsten**

Still, people occasionally made negative comments about her weight — assuming she wasn't pregnant — even when she was wearing what she thought were her "most pregnant-looking" outfits. But she figures that's more their problem than hers.

"This is how I look at it: I've worn a size 16 to 24 most of my life," she says, matter-of-factly. "You get used to those comments. You can choose to let them make you angry, or you can choose to try to ignore them. That's what I do. Seems to me the most important thing about your pregnancy is that you just eat healthy and surround yourself with nice people."

She adds, "You need to try to enjoy being pregnant. It's an experience of a lifetime."

And Lehman did enjoy her pregnancies. Her first yielded a happy, healthy baby girl, Mallora. Her second pregnancy was complication-free, and she gave birth in July 2006 to 8-pound, 6-ounce Thorsten.

Jennifer: An "easy" pregnancy

When Jennifer Mountain, a 29-year-old mom of one and a real estate contractor in Haslet, Texas, got pregnant in 2005, the last thing on her mind was how her weight would affect her baby. She was finishing her master's degree in social work, working part-time at a real estate office, and interning at a day resource center for the homeless. Plus, she and her husband had just filed for bankruptcy.



Jennifer Mountain and her little pumpkin

"My biggest surprise with the pregnancy has been how easy it was. It's been a blessing," says the Texas native, who, at 5 feet 5 inches, weighed 245 before getting pregnant.

She gained 10 to 15 pounds during the pregnancy without changing her diet, and she tested negative for "everything you're 'supposed' to get as a plus-size pregnant woman" — such as gestational diabetes and preeclampsia.

Ironically, it's been her friends and family — not the medical professionals — who keep predicting dire outcomes for her pregnancy.

"You can be healthy and overweight, and it's been nice having medical professionals support me in that," she says. "It was a little disconcerting sometimes having my family react so poorly, though. I just didn't listen to them."

Elisha: Winning out over medical skeptics

At 32, Elisha Mitchell has two beautiful girls — and she had both as a plus-size woman. Unlike many other women, she didn't worry about her weight affecting her babies.

"Overall, I knew I was healthy — maybe more so than some skinny people," she says. "I ate healthy, avoided caffeine, didn't smoke, stayed out of smoke-filled places, didn't drink, didn't do drugs, ate low-fat and high-protein foods, and exercised. So even though I was overweight, I actually felt quite healthy. Heck, the day before I delivered Zöe [her first child], I went on a two-mile hike!"

Mitchell, a web designer who was living in Nashville, Tennessee, at the time of her first pregnancy, found healthcare providers who didn't patronize her because of her weight — and left one who did — and, she says, ate healthier as a pregnant woman than she does as a mom. "If only I cared about myself as much as I cared about my girls!" she jokes.

She gave birth to 8-pound, 2-ounce Zöe after a 12-hour labor, and the only complication was that she needed an episiotomy.

Her second daughter, Bella, was a different story, however. "That pregnancy was complicated from conception!" she says. "I was diagnosed with gestational diabetes, but I was borderline, meaning I fell over into that category by like only two points. So I had to come in weekly for fetal heart tests."

When she was diagnosed with gestational diabetes, Mitchell admits to becoming mad at herself, convinced that she wouldn't be borderline for gestational diabetes if she weighed less. Still, she had no complications and was religious



Elisha Mitchell with Zöe, Bella, and husband Chris

about keeping her doctor appointments, taking a pill every morning to regulate her blood sugar, and testing her blood sugar three times a day.

The worst part about her second pregnancy, she says, was how the medical community treated her. Having moved from Tennessee to Ohio, she had to change healthcare providers and deal with a new medical system — an impersonal one that treated her, she says, as a "number, not a person."

Her delivery was frustrating, too. Convinced Bella would be a large baby because of the gestational diabetes, her doctor induced her a week early. Things went downhill from there: Medical residents tried for almost an hour to give her an epidural before an anesthesiologist came in and injected it in a few minutes, the umbilical chord wrapped itself around Bella's neck when Mitchell's water was artificially broken, and both the baby's and Mitchell's heart rates began to drop.

Eventually, a doctor came in and suggested they refill Mitchell's uterus with fake amniotic fluid. Bella relaxed, both heart rates returned to normal, and Mitchell delivered vaginally within an hour with no further problems. Bella, it turned out, wasn't a large baby after all — she weighed in at 7 pounds, 8 ounces, with normal blood sugar.

"I really think that if I were able to stay with my first ob-gyn for my second pregnancy, I would have had a normal delivery just like I did with Zöe," Mitchell says. "But who knows? The bottom line is that they are both healthy!"

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