

## 'Eating for two' philosophy isn't healthy for moms

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When Ximena Ramos was pregnant and woke in the middle of the night with cravings for McDonald's french fries, her husband would head out to find a 24-hour fast-food joint.

After all, in the Chilean culture, Ramos says it was almost considered his duty. Pregnant mothers are supposed to eat anything they want, whether that be pickles, peanut butter and ice cream, or, in Ramos's case, french fries, sweet cakes and pastries.

"You have to give in to every craving. It's bad for your baby if you don't," Ramos said. She knows better now, having gained 40 pounds during pregnancy instead of the recommended 15 to 20 pounds. She wasn't successful in losing the weight until years later, when she was classified as obese. She knew she could develop diabetes or high blood pressure if she didn't do something about it.

Ramos, whose son is now seven, believes a new research project to find out why many pregnant women gain too much weight is important to outline practical prevention advice for mothers and their health providers.

While it may seem obvious - some women eat too many calories, often fatty and sugary ones, while they are pregnant, and so gain weight and bad habits that are difficult to shed - Rhonda Bell, a researcher in human nutrition at the University of Alberta, says her study aims to find out if there are other factors at play.

Are there metabolic differences in the 56 per cent of women who gain more weight than is good for them during pregnancy? How does depression and lack of sleep play into what women eat and how many calories they burn? With \$2.5 million over five years from an Alberta Innovates Health Solutions grant, Bell will study 60 to 80 women in the year following childbirth to come up with a list of resources to help women keep healthy weights during and after pregnancy.

"Although the topic is not new, what's new is being able to address the topic," Bell said. "I don't think it's news to any woman that they put on weight during pregnancy and they have a hard time taking it off afterwards. I think most women know that, but how can we help that, help women stay in that range?"

Resources could include educational components to teach the spouse or in-laws about healthy eating habits, or food vouchers to explain healthy food purchasing patterns to low-income women.

"A lot of women have this idea, and their families and society and lots of others think, 'You're eating for two, your baby is hungry,' " Bell said.

"They must need an extra doughnut. But truthfully, that baby is only going to be 3.5 kilos, so how much calories do they really need?"

On average, a pregnant woman is advised to eat an extra 350 to 400 calories each day on top of the 1,800 to 2,200 calories the average woman eats.

"That's a snack. That's an apple and a serving of yogurt. Or a peanut butter sandwich and a glass of milk," Bell said. "It's not like six pieces of lasagna or 20 cookies or four bags of chips."

She also hopes to come up with more concrete guidelines on caloric intake as breastfeeding rates go down. Women are advised to eat an additional 500 to 600 calories each day when they are breastfeeding their babies exclusively, she said. But once infants are put on solid foods and breastfed for 10-minute segments, no such caloric guideline is in place, Bell said.

"A lot of women have the impression that as long as they breastfeed, the weight will magically fall off of them," Bell says. "The more weight you gain in pregnancy, the less likely it is you'll lose it postpartum. Why is the great question. It's complicated."

Ramos now counts calories every day, but tries not to be obsessed with food or her weight. She continues to teach spin and aerobics classes and doesn't bend to midnight cravings. "That is junk food. It's not food."

## Calorimetry Unit

Researcher Rhonda Bell, in the University of Alberta's faculty of agricultural, life and environmental sciences, is searching for 60 to 80 new mothers who have given birth within the past 12 months and are willing to live in Canada's only "calorimetry unit" for 24 hours on the university campus.



The laboratory is like a free hotel room, Bell said, but one the woman can't leave for 24 hours. While there, she will have access to the Internet, TV, a treadmill, free food, fridge, washroom, phone and a comfy bed. But the room is sealed. That allows researchers to sample the gases inside the room every minute, comparing how much oxygen the woman is breathing and how much carbon dioxide she exhales.

With that data, scientists can determine how much energy and what type of calories (fat versus carbohydrates, for instance) the mother is burning by doing everyday chores.



Food arrives in airlocked chambers. Leftovers are measured, too. Blood samples are taken through special portals with rubber gaskets sealing around the arms.

Bell aims to have the first women stay there before Christmas.