



Researcher explores pregnant women's weight issues

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Current research in the University of Alberta's Faculty of Agricultural, Life and Environmental Sciences (ALES) seeks to help pregnant women gain the right amount of weight during pregnancy and avoid retaining too much after giving birth.

According to Rhonda Bell, a human nutrition researcher examining this problem, appropriate weight gain during pregnancy and loss postpartum tends to be difficult even for the most financially stable, well-equipped mothers.

"We tend to recruit women who are motivated, who are highly educated, (with) higher income. They have barriers to eating well and to being physically active, but not as many, probably, as many other people," she said.

Of these women, who tend to come from an echelon of society with higher-than-average access to resources already in place to guide healthy pregnancies, 56 per cent gain excessive weight during pregnancy, and one third retain weight above the Health Canada-recommended levels postpartum. Bell described a stepwise pattern many women experience with multiple pregnancies, where weight that doesn't come off following the birth of one baby adds to the problem of excess weight gain during their next pregnancy, and so on.

To address this issue, Bell and an international group of colleagues from centres in Edmonton, Calgary, Ottawa, USA, UK and Sweden have come together to work on a five-year study called

Enrich, which has been funded as of April 2013 by Alberta Innovates Health Solutions. Bell said a wide array of information already exists regarding the way nutrition and maternal health affects pregnancy outcomes, but highlighted how Enrich seeks to delve further into communicating the information effectively to women.

“We’re putting together all the information that we already have. But we also want to know a little bit more about what women think about, how they perceive weight gain in pregnancy and weight loss postpartum, and what they see as barriers or facilitators,” Bell said.

“We need to know not just what the facts say, but what do women think about this.”

Bell emphasized that understanding women’s perceptions, experiences and needs during this important, yet busy and stressful, time in their lives is a critical step to take before effective guidelines can be developed.

“We don’t want to develop a strategy and then hand it out to health care providers and have them go, ‘Yeah right, I’m not doing that.’ You have to work with people to make things that make sense for them,” she said.

Currently, family physicians are seen as one of the primary sources of information for pregnant women when it comes to their health and the health of their baby, Bell said. She explained there’s a particular need for new strategies in this area due to the sheer volume of information family physicians are now required to discuss with each pregnant patient.

“When a doctor has a woman who comes in who’s pregnant, they’re given a list that’s about 91 different items long and they’re supposed to go through that in a 15-minute visit,” she said.

To address the current health hurdles faced by pregnant women from as many angles as possible, the Enrich study brings together an array of researchers, physicians and community-based care providers. Family physicians, gynecologists, health psychologists, nutritionists, university researchers, representatives from Alberta Health Services and various community organizations such as Best Beginning in Calgary and The Multicultural Health Brokers in Edmonton are collaborating on the project.

Bell explained having community organizations involved in the process provides a place for new strategies to be implemented, once developed. She added that the input from these sectors allows for maximum tailoring of pregnancy weight management guidelines to the actual women in need of these resources.