Eating disorders and pregnancy

Eating disorders and pregnancy is a topic we are asked about frequently in the press office. It can often be a particularly challenging time for individuals who have or have had an eating disorder due to the changes in the body and hormones. There are also the added worries and concerns every mother-to-be has during pregnancy.

We unfortunately do not have any statistics about the number of pregnancies where the mother is affected by an eating disorder. What we do know is that there is an increase in the incidence of eating disorders in the UK which also means that there are more people falling pregnant who have or have had an eating disorder.

A recent study by Dr Abigail Easter and Dr Nadia Micali at the UCL Institute of Child Health recommended that women should be screened for an eating disorder at their antenatal check-up as they found that eating disorders were more common in pregnancy than previously thought. Dr Easter said “Women with eating disorders are often reluctant to disclose their illness to healthcare professionals, possibly due to a fear that health services might respond in a negative way. Typical pregnancy symptoms such as weight gain and vomiting can also mask the presence of an eating disorder. Many women with eating disorders may therefore go undetected and untreated during pregnancy.”

We do receive calls to our Helpline and have message board users who are pregnant and have an eating disorder. Generally the issues discussed are around minimising eating disorder behaviours but concerns can often be around after the birth, coping with a new baby, changed body shape and having the motivation to protect their unborn child.

To grow a healthy baby it is important that expectant mothers eat healthily and gain weight. Very often mothers-to-be feel very guilty about the effect their eating disorder has on their unborn baby which can add pressure to minimise their eating behaviours.

Support is available to those coping with an eating disorder through pregnancy. Beat would always encourage individuals to discuss their concerns with their healthcare specialists, family or even friends as they will be able to provide appropriate advice.

Some people find that becoming pregnant helps them to come to terms with their body for the first time. They can finally understand that it has a real purpose, and they can develop healthy eating behaviours for the baby’s sake. Others find that the sense of their body being ‘out of control’ gets even stronger, and find it much more difficult to cope.
Fertility

Eating disorders can affect fertility and we also sometimes hear of stories that an individual doesn’t realise they’re pregnant due to their disturbed menstrual cycle. Amenorrhea (not having periods) is part of the definition of anorexia nervosa. Due to this it is unlikely that individuals are acutely anorexic when they fall pregnant but fertility can be affected. Bulimia nervosa is less likely to have an impact on conception although some people are affected by Polycystic Ovary Syndrome. Those with binge eating disorder or compulsive overeating can often have their fertility affected if they are overweight.

Having a family can often be a real focus for someone’s recovery and we are always so pleased to hear that someone has been able to have a family at Beat especially if they’ve been told it was unlikely they ever would.

Case studies

Julia, 29
Falling pregnant was simply the best news we could have hoped for. I’d suffered with anorexia for years from an early age and I was told that my fertility was affected so although my bump was not planned and came as a bit of a shock I could not have been happier when I found out the news. When I fell pregnant I had been in recovery for two years and was at a low to normal weight but as soon as I found out it really empowered me to focus on changing my eating habits for good. I would never have forgiven myself if something had happened because of my eating disorder. I’m not saying it was easy – eating disorders aren’t a choice but knowing that it wasn’t just me I needed to care for any more pushed me to recovery.

Alexandra, 31
I was in the grips of bulimia when I fell pregnant. I’d been in treatment for my eating disorder but had continually relapsed. Having the responsibility of this tiny little person inside only made me more anxious. I hated knowing that I had to gain weight to make sure he was healthy - I’d miscarried two years earlier because I was so scared of gaining even an ounce. I couldn’t tell my midwife about my eating disorder. I was so scared about what she would think of me. I was so determined to keep control of my eating rather than it controlling me but eventually I had to be induced early as he had stopped growing. I’m so lucky to have my little boy and he’s taught me how to look at life that little bit differently. I’m doing much better, still struggling but he makes me feel stronger, and I don’t want to pass on my behaviours to him.