

North Carolina Women's Hospital

Gestational Diabetes

What is diabetes?

When you have diabetes, your body does not use the sugars in food the way it should. Normally, when you eat, your body makes insulin. Insulin helps turn the sugar in your body into fat. When a woman has diabetes, her body is not making enough insulin, so the level of sugar in her blood gets too high. This high blood sugar causes other health problems.

There are several types of diabetes. One type is called gestational diabetes. Women with gestational diabetes first find out they have a blood sugar problem during pregnancy. This problem happens because the hormones of pregnancy keep a woman's body from storing sugar as fat. When this happens, the sugar levels in her blood become too high.

What are the dangers of untreated gestational diabetes?

High blood sugars can cause the baby to grow too large and make giving birth difficult. Sometimes babies born to women with gestational diabetes will develop problems after birth, like low blood sugar or trouble breathing. If the mother learns how to control her blood sugar, these problems are less likely to occur.

Why did I get gestational diabetes?

Gestational diabetes happens to about 1 out of every 20 women. It is more common among women who are overweight before pregnancy or who have family members with diabetes, but any woman can get gestational diabetes.

What can I do if I have gestational diabetes?

There are five things a woman can do to decrease the problems that gestational diabetes can cause for her health and the health of her unborn baby. You need to:

- Eat the well balanced diet that your health care provider recommends.
- Exercise every day.
- Learn how to check your blood sugar and write it down according to your provider's instructions.
- Control your blood sugars. To start, you'll learn how to choose healthier foods. Some women will also need to take pills or insulin shots. These pills and shots are safe for your baby. Many women need to both change their diet and take medicines to keep their blood sugars from becoming too high.
- Keep all of your clinic appointments so you and your doctor can adjust your diet and medicines if your blood sugar is too high or too low.

How am I going to learn how to do all of the things I need to do?

Ask your health care provider about special classes to help you learn how to choose healthy foods, check your blood sugar and take medicines, if you need them. After you have learned how to keep your sugars in a safe range, you may be able to go to your usual health care provider for the rest of your prenatal care. We know you may feel worried, and we are here to help you and your family feel safe about your health and the health of your unborn baby. Ask as many questions as you have.

Will the problem go away after I have my baby?

Your blood sugars will probably return to normal after you have your baby. It's important to know that women who have had gestational diabetes are more likely to develop diabetes later in life. You can reduce your risk by breastfeeding your baby, continuing a healthy diet and exercising every day. You should have your blood sugar checked when you come for your check-up after birth, and at least once a year after that. If you become pregnant again, you need to tell your health care provider that you had gestational diabetes.

Approved by UNC Women's Hospital Patient Education Steering Committee on June 16, 2009