This pamphlet uses visual tools to support your informed choice discussion with your midwife. To learn more about gestational diabetes and other informed choice topics, visit uoft.me/visualtools.
Gestational diabetes, also called gestational diabetes mellitus or GDM, is a condition in which your body becomes intolerant to glucose (sugar) during pregnancy. It is similar to type 2 diabetes, except that it begins during pregnancy and usually goes away after you give birth. The reason some women develop gestational diabetes has to do with the roles of glucose, insulin, and hormones produced in your body during pregnancy.

In pregnancy, hormones produced by your placenta block the insulin receptors on your cells, so it is harder for them to absorb glucose. Once the glucose receptors are exposed, your cells can absorb glucose from your blood and use it as energy.

Your cells take in the insulin through special receptors. This causes glucose receptors to move to the outer surface of the cell.

Different studies have revealed different statistics around gestational diabetes. These numbers vary because gestational diabetes is more common among some groups of women than others.

The graphs below show how age and body mass index (BMI) can affect a woman’s risk of developing gestational diabetes. Please note that the numbers below are based on only one research study. There are many factors that may affect your risk level.

Based on one large Canadian study, about 6.5% of pregnant women are diagnosed with gestational diabetes. Another study, focusing on women in the Greater Toronto Area, estimated that the rate of gestational diabetes is about 3.8%.

However, your individual risk level may be higher or lower, depending on a number of factors. The following factors are generally associated with an increased risk of gestational diabetes:

- Older age, especially if you are over 35
- If you have a history of diabetes in your family
- If you have had gestational diabetes in a previous pregnancy
- If you have previously given birth to a baby weighing over 4kg
- If you were overweight or obese before you were pregnant
- Non-white race/ethnicity
Gestational diabetes may be associated with health risks for both women and their babies, but there are steps you can take to help lower these risks.

The following are health risks associated with untreated gestational diabetes:

- Woman may develop type 2 diabetes later in life
- Baby may grow to be over 4kg before birth
- Baby may be at risk for obesity and diabetes later in life

If you have gestational diabetes, you can take the following steps to help keep yourself and your baby healthy:

- Change your diet. Since glucose comes from foods containing carbohydrates, it is important that you monitor your intake of those foods and choose the most nutritious ones.
- Get more exercise. Exercising regularly can help reduce risks associated with gestational diabetes, but it can also help you reduce stress, relieve pain, and sleep better.
- Check your blood sugar regularly. Your health care provider will give you a tool called a blood glucose meter and show you how to monitor your blood sugar. Depending on how you respond to diet and exercise, your care provider may recommend insulin injections.

EAT MORE OF THESE
- vegetables
- fruits
- beans, legumes
- whole grain bread
- oatmeal
- milk, yogurt
- brown rice

EAT LESS OF THESE
- potatoes
- sweets
- pasta
- white bread
- sugary cereal
- ice cream
- white rice

Walking, yoga, and low-impact aerobics are a few examples of exercise that can help you stay at a healthy weight during pregnancy.
Worksheet

If you are trying to decide whether or not to get screened for gestational diabetes, answering the questions below and discussing them with your midwife can help you determine what your risk level is.

What is your age? _______  Who (if anyone) in your family has/had diabetes? _______

If you have had a baby before, how much did he/she weigh at birth? _______  What is your race? _______

Before you were pregnant, were you overweight or obese? _______  Have you had gestational diabetes before? _______

I am concerned about: ____________________________

I would like to learn more about: ____________________________

Questions for my midwife: ____________________________

References


About this pamphlet

The Visual Tools pamphlets originated as part of a Master’s research project comprising a series of printed pamphlets and corresponding web modules focusing on specific informed choice topics in midwifery care. The web modules offer more detailed information on each topic, including additional illustrations, and can be accessed at uoft.me/visualtools. The project was completed by Amanda Montañez (amandamontanez.com) with the support of the MScBMC program at the University of Toronto. This gestational diabetes pamphlet was created with the support of Women’s Xchange at Women’s College Hospital.

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