

Body mass index and pregnancy

One of the aims of care during pregnancy is to identify those women who may need extra help with the delivery of their baby. One factor that increases the risk of this is a high body mass index – BMI. Body mass index is the relationship between your height and your weight and it goes up as your weight increases. If your BMI is high – particularly if it is above 40 – the chances of pregnancy related complications is higher than women with a normal BMI. However, many women with a high BMI do have uncomplicated pregnancies and deliveries.



Seeing an anaesthetist during pregnancy

As part of your antenatal care, you will be referred to the metabolic clinic. During your appointment at this clinic you will see an anaesthetist on at least one occasion. This is an opportunity for the anaesthetist to meet you in a relaxed environment to discuss your pregnancy and how the anaesthetist may be involved with your delivery. This is also a good opportunity to discuss pain relief in labour, including epidurals.

Why will I see an anaesthetist?

Performing some procedures may be more difficult if you have a high BMI. In particular it may take longer to perform an epidural. For this reason you may be offered advice on planning to have an epidural earlier in labour. During your appointment the anaesthetist will also look at your mouth and neck to assess the ease of caring for you under general anaesthetic, if this is required. They will also examine your back using ultrasound to check for any predicted difficulty regarding inserting an epidural or spinal anaesthetic.

What will happen if I go to theatre?

Women with a high BMI are more likely to need assistance to deliver their baby, such as a forceps delivery or a caesarean section. If you have an epidural in place already then this can usually be used to allow the delivery to happen quickly. This is called 'topping-up' the epidural. If you do not have an epidural, then you would need a spinal anaesthetic or a general anaesthetic.

A general anaesthetic means that you will be asleep when your baby is born. Giving a general anaesthetic may be more difficult if you have a high BMI. Therefore it is safer and preferable to have an epidural or spinal anaesthetic, if this is possible.

A spinal or a topped-up epidural anaesthetic is when you are awake but sensation from the lower body is numbed. Being awake for a caesarean section or a forceps delivery has many advantages to a woman and her baby and is the most common way for this to be undertaken.

Other considerations

You may have had times when it is difficult to take blood tests from you. The anaesthetist will examine your veins during your visit to identify a vein from which to take blood tests or insert a drip.

This leaflet was produced by the obstetric anaesthetists at the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh. There are more excellent resources which you can read including those published by the Royal College of Obstetricians & Gynaecologists (RCOG) and LabourPains.com. Scan the QR codes to access these.



LabourPains.com



rcog.org.uk