

Obesity in pregnancy is dangerous: study

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By Angela Harper-Erini

Obese and overweight pregnant women are putting themselves and their babies at risk of chronic conditions, a new study warns.

Life-long conditions such as diabetes and obesity plague these mothers as well as their children - sometimes causing death.

The study found that babies of such women could suffer birth defects, need special-care nurseries after pre-term delivery, and were often overweight - a trend that continued through childhood and into adulthood.

Overweight and obese mothers were at risk of diabetes, high blood pressure and delivery by caesarean section, while cancer and heart disease could also develop.

A group of medical specialists at the Royal Brisbane and Women's Hospital (RBWH) are studying the problem in a bid to educate at-risk mums and prevent chronic disease in mothers and babies.

Ongoing research is also uncovering disturbing findings that many at-risk mums are from low socio-economic or violent backgrounds or suffer from major psychological problems.

"A large number of these women had profoundly traumatic backgrounds," maternal and foetal medicine specialist Leonie Calloway told the RBWH Health Care Symposium.

"They had been sexually abused, bashed up, (and in) violent previous relationships."

Ten per cent of the women attending the antenatal clinic reported a history of sexual abuse, Dr Calloway said.

The pilot study into overweight and obese mothers-to-be, which was prompted by the obesity epidemic, sampled 50 pregnant women classed as overweight or obese according to their Body Mass Index (BMI).

RBWH dietician Susie Croaker said it was crucial to stem problems before they worsened as families and the health system paid a heavy price.

"This is about, in a health system environment that's often focused on dealing with illness, doing a little bit of preventative medicine in this optimum, critical period in the mother and baby's life cycle," Ms Croaker said.

"The babies have a higher number of birth defects as well as pre-term deliveries.

"More babies are admitted to special care nurseries because of pre-term deliveries."

Research coordinator Lynda Gillen said pre-birth checkups were an opportune time to educate and help mums-to-be because they were motivated to fix poor habits.

"Let's grab them and do some lifestyle education rather than wait 10 or 20 years when they return with chronic disease," Dr Gillen said.

This group also had more problems with breastfeeding and were unable to sustain it for long periods.

Many had stopped exclusively breastfeeding just six weeks after giving birth.

Although the survey was Queensland-based, the researchers say the results were indicative of pregnancies throughout Australia.



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