

What is gestational diabetes?

Diabetes mellitus (also called “diabetes”) is a condition in which too much glucose (sugar) stays in the blood instead of being used for energy. Health problems can occur when blood sugar is too high. Some women develop diabetes for the first time during pregnancy. This condition is called gestational diabetes (GDM). Women with GDM need special care both during and after pregnancy.

If I develop GDM, will I always have diabetes?

GDM goes away after childbirth, but women who have had GDM are at higher risk of developing diabetes later in life. Some women who develop GDM may have had mild diabetes before pregnancy and not known it. For these women, diabetes does not go away after pregnancy and may be a lifelong condition.

What are the risk factors for GDM?

- Being overweight or obese
- Being physically inactive
- Having GDM in a previous pregnancy
- Having a very large baby (9 pounds or more) in a previous pregnancy
- Having high blood pressure
- Having a history of heart disease
- Having polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS)

How can GDM affect a pregnant woman?

When a woman has GDM, her body passes more sugar to her fetus than it needs. With too much sugar, her fetus can gain a lot of weight. A large fetus (weighing 9 pounds or more) can lead to complications for the woman, including:

- Labor difficulties
- Cesarean birth
- Heavy bleeding after delivery
- Severe tears in the vagina or the area between the vagina and the anus with a vaginal birth

How will I manage GDM during pregnancy?

You will need more frequent prenatal care visits to monitor your health and your fetus’s health. You will need to track your blood sugar and do things to keep it under control. Doing so will reduce the risks to both you and your fetus. For many women, a healthy diet and regular exercise will control blood sugar. Some women may need medications to help reach normal blood sugar levels even with diet changes and exercise.

Should I change my diet if I have GDM?

When women have GDM, making healthy food choices is even more important to keep blood sugar levels from getting too high. If you have GDM, you should eat regular meals throughout the day. You may need to eat small snacks as well, especially at night. Eating regularly helps avoid dips and spikes in your blood sugar level. Often, three meals and two to three snacks per day are recommended.

Also, it is important to gain a healthy amount of weight during pregnancy. Talk with your ob-gyn about how much weight gain is best for your pregnancy. For a woman with GDM, too much weight gained or weight gained too quickly can make it harder to keep blood sugar levels under control.

What is gestational hypertension?

Gestational hypertension is high blood pressure that begins after 20 weeks of pregnancy in someone who had normal blood pressure before pregnancy.

A woman has gestational hypertension when:

- She has a systolic blood pressure of 140 mmHg or higher and/or a diastolic blood pressure of 90 mmHg or higher.
- The high blood pressure first happens after 20 weeks.
- She had normal blood pressure before pregnancy

Most women with gestational hypertension have only a small increase in blood pressure. But some women develop severe hypertension (defined as systolic blood pressure of 160 mm Hg or higher and/or diastolic blood pressure of 110 mm Hg or higher). These women are at risk of very serious complications.

How is gestational hypertension diagnosed?

Hypertension during pregnancy is diagnosed when the systolic blood pressure is greater than 140mmHg and/or the diastolic blood pressure greater than 90mmHg.

What is preeclampsia?

A disorder that can occur during pregnancy (after 20 weeks of pregnancy) or after childbirth in which there is high blood pressure and other signs of organ injury, specifically, the kidney. Sometimes, preeclampsia can lead to eclampsia, a condition that causes seizures and/or strokes.

How is preeclampsia diagnosed?

Preeclampsia is diagnosed by a blood pressure reading and a urine test to check your kidneys. A blood test may also be performed to monitor other organ function.

What are symptoms of gestational hypertension and preeclampsia?

If you are pregnant and are experiencing any of the following symptoms, speak to your healthcare provider about getting tested for hypertension:

- High blood pressure
- Pain in the upper abdomen
- Swelling in hands and face
- Severe headaches
- Blurred vision
- Difficulty breathing
- Not urinating very often or producing small amounts of urine (preeclampsia only)

Who is at risk for preeclampsia and/or gestational hypertension?

It is not clear why some women develop preeclampsia. If you have any of the following conditions, speak to your healthcare provider about getting tested for gestational hypertension and/or preeclampsia.

If you...

- Had high blood pressure before becoming pregnant (chronic hypertension)
- Had preeclampsia or gestational hypertension in a previous pregnancy
- Are pregnant with more than one fetus
- Have Diabetes (Type 1 or Type 2)
- Have a kidney disease/disorder
- Have an autoimmune disorder, such as lupus (systemic lupus erythematosus or SLE)
- Are older than 35 years old
- Are pregnant for the first time
- Have family history of preeclampsia or gestational hypertension (mother or sister)

How do I prevent gestational hypertension and/or preeclampsia?

There is no screening test that can predict whether someone will develop gestational hypertension or preeclampsia during pregnancy. For now, prevention involves identifying risk factors and symptoms early so you can begin treatment early.

However, for patients with a high-risk of preeclampsia, healthcare providers may recommend low-dose aspirin until delivery. Speak with your healthcare provider before beginning aspirin use.

I'm pregnant. How can I reduce my risk of developing complications related to hypertension?

If you are pregnant or recently gave birth, here is what you can do to monitor your health:

- Attend all of your prenatal appointments, where your blood pressure checked regularly
- Identify symptoms early, especially if you are at high risk for developing hypertension