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## Weight loss: What are the best ways to lose the extra weight gained in pregnancy?



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Weight gain is normal during pregnancy. This weight is needed to help nourish the growing baby. The woman's body also needs to gain a lot of fluid to support the extra circulation needed for the placenta and the baby.

The extra efforts involved in feeding and caring for a new baby often mean that the weight gained during pregnancy melts away without any effort. But for many women this weight will not go away quickly. Nearly half of all women will still not be very close to their pre-pregnancy weight six months after childbirth.

In this case, "very close" to pre-pregnancy weight means within one or two kilos, and not necessarily exactly the same weight. Women gradually gain a little weight as they get older - whether or not they have babies. This will usually not cause health problems. However, pregnancy weight gain can sometimes be one of the contributors to a woman going from a more normal weight to becoming overweight or obese. Women who do not lose most of the weight they gained in pregnancy by six months or a year after the baby is born might be more likely to continue to have weight problems in the long term. The problem might get worse in the next pregnancy, too.

## Avoiding long-term weight problems after pregnancy

One of the best ways for women to avoid weight problems after childbirth is to gain enough weight during pregnancy for their and their baby's good health, but not too much. You can read more about normal weight in pregnancy in our [fact sheet](http://www.informedhealthonline.org/index.518.en.html) (URL: <http://www.informedhealthonline.org/index.518.en.html>).

The second issue to consider is changes in eating and exercise habits. Having a new baby is a major change in lifestyle. One of the reasons that pregnancy weight can be difficult to lose, or can lead to lifelong weight problems, is that a woman changes her eating habits or stops her usual forms of exercise.

The main options for trying to lose weight are a balanced diet or extra exercise. Programmes to help people change their eating and lifestyle habits are often used to try to

achieve this. After childbirth, weight loss is complicated by the extra stresses the mother is facing, and her need to provide nutrition for her baby if she is breastfeeding. Breastfeeding itself can help reduce weight, but this is not always enough.

But too much, or too sudden, weight loss can also have disadvantages. It is not necessary to start trying to lose weight straight after giving birth. The possible adverse effects of too much dieting or exercise after having a baby may include a reduction in the quality or quantity of breast milk. There are also unhealthy ways of losing weight – now is probably not the time to try the latest fad diet or the newest miracle pill, for example. You can read more about weight loss generally here (URL: <http://www.gesundheitsinformation.de/fact-sheet-health-benefits-c>).

## Research results on ways to lose weight after childbirth

Researchers from an international research network called the Cochrane Collaboration looked for trials that could help determine the best – and safest – way to lose weight after childbirth. In these trials, the women volunteer to be assigned to a particular weight loss programme, or to continue as normal. Afterwards, the results of the different groups of women are compared, to see whether one approach was more successful or had more disadvantages than others. You can read more about this kind of research and why it is the best way to be certain that a diet or exercise programme works here (URL: <http://www.gesundheitsinformation.de/evidence-based-medicine>).

The Cochrane researchers found that less than 250 women have been involved in trials of different ways to lose weight after childbirth. There were 6 trials, covering programmes like:

- a pram walking group with other women
- Group weight loss meetings, with lessons about eating habits, monitoring what you eat and getting extra exercise – some with cooking demonstrations
- Diets with calorie or fat restriction, with or without an exercise programme

The exercise programmes in the trials generally started one or two months after the women had given birth.

The programmes were all so different, and each trial involved a relatively small number of women. This means that the researchers concluded that it is too soon to know what the most effective way to lose weight after childbirth is, and whether any methods are harmful for breastfeeding. According to the researchers, the evidence suggests that a healthy diet, with or without exercise, can help women reduce weight after childbirth without negatively affecting breastfeeding. In the small trials, even doing a lot of exercise did not provide additional weight loss. However, the researchers pointed out that exercise can also improve cardiovascular (heart and circulation) fitness and may have other benefits than simply weight loss.

You can read more about weight loss and exercise, including the health benefits of walking, here (URL: <http://www.informedhealthonline.org/weight-loss.398.56.en.html>)

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## Glossary

### Cochrane Collaboration

The Cochrane Collaboration is an international network of thousands of researchers and others. They work together in teams called Cochrane Review Groups to answer questions about health care by doing systematic reviews of evidence. To achieve this, the members of the Collaboration have developed systems and methods for systematically finding and analysing the results of trials of health care interventions. The goal of the Cochrane Collaboration is to help patients, health care practitioners and others make more informed decisions about health care. You can read more about the Cochrane Collaboration at their website.

### evidence

Evidence is what we call scientific proof from well-conducted, good-quality scientific trials that have been carefully designed to answer specific questions. Depending on the types of questions, different scientific research methods (types of study) are most appropriate to find reliable answers to these questions. Randomized controlled trials (RCTs), for example, are the best way to get reliable evidence on the effectiveness of medical treatments (interventions). This type of study, however, is not the best form of evidence for all possible questions, and does not provide the best answers to all kinds of questions, either. Epidemiological studies, for example, are very suitable for establishing well-founded proof for the spreading of a disease in the population.

## Sources

IQWiG health information is based on research in the international literature. We identify the most scientifically reliable knowledge currently available, in particular, systematic reviews of the effects of health care. You can read more about systematic reviews and why these can provide the most trustworthy evidence about the state of knowledge here (URL: <http://www.gesundheitsinformation.de/evidence-based-medicine.61.en.html>) . The authors of the major systematic reviews on which our information is based are always approached to help us ensure the medical and scientific accuracy of our research summaries.

Amorim Adegboye AR, Linne YM, Lourenco PMC. Diet or exercise, or both, for weight reduction in women after childbirth. *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews* 2008, Issue 2. [Cochrane summary (URL: <http://www.mrw.interscience.wiley.com/cochrane/clsysrev/articles/CD005627/frame.html>) ]

## **The German Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care (IQWiG)**

The German Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care (IQWiG) was established by legislation to provide evaluations of the effectiveness, quality and efficiency of healthcare services. This includes the assessment of medicines as well as the publication of health information for consumers and patients.

## **Evidence basis of our health information**

Our information is based primarily on systematic reviews of the effects of health care. Systematic reviews are necessary to gain an objective picture of health care. In order to do this, a clear question is formulated. Researchers then find all the relevant studies that could answer this question. They then evaluate those studies.

You can find a list of the evidence and other scientific literature on which this information is based at **[www.informedhealthonline.org](http://www.informedhealthonline.org)**

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