



oh baby!

Great Expectations

Learn to love your body and its pregnancy changes.

by Heidi Smith Luedtke, Air Force spouse

If I see another Hollywood celebrity with a cute little baby bump, I might throw up. Not because I have morning sickness (I had a stomach of steel even in the first trimester) but because my body takes more of a “fat all over” approach to pregnancy.

CULTURE CLASH

Military culture may encourage us to focus on how we look, because standards of grooming and dress are emphasized for service members and spouses. Pregnancy only magnifies appearance concerns, because everyone focuses on how much weight you're gaining and how high or low you carry the baby. Concerns about going through pregnancy or childbirth alone, or about your spouse's safety, may also make a military spouse's pregnancy more stressful. Eating right can be challenging if you tend to eat when you're overwhelmed or anxious. When your deployed husband or friends back home ask for pictures of your growing belly, you might want to cry if you don't love your changing shape.

Some women feel liberated from social expectations about their bodies when they are pregnant, said Sarah Murnen, Ph.D, chair of the psychology department at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio. They feel it is OK to eat treats, gain weight and do kinder, gentler workouts.

Others — especially those with preexisting body image issues or eating disorders — dislike their physical appearance even though they're excited about having a baby. They may feel intense pressure to keep their pre-pregnancy physique. "Women who monitor their bodies and compare them to social standards ... are likely to be dissatisfied," Murnen said. "The image portrayed in the media is such an unrealistic ideal."

BODY IMAGE

It's normal to be concerned about your weight or shape during pregnancy, said Michelle Collins, a certified nurse midwife and assistant professor of nursing at Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tenn. Women with large breasts may be really uncomfortable, and athletic women may be frustrated that they can't keep up their previous fitness routines. Darker nipples and stretch marks are changes some women resent during (and after) pregnancy.

Poor body image can lead to the recurrence of an eating disorder and to anxiety and depression. Moms with body dissatisfaction are also less likely to breast-feed, either because they feel insecure about milk production or because they want to regain their pre-baby body as soon as possible, said Collins.

You may feel less than sexy, even if your spouse loves the way you look. And he probably does. Experts say men are more accepting of the changes in our bodies than women. "Women put a lot of pressure on each other and themselves," Murnen said.

If you're struggling to feel good about your body, boost your spirits by focusing on what your body can do, not how it looks. "You can never live up to social standards," Murnen said.

And even if you could, doing so might not be the healthiest thing for you or your baby. You're building a person with tiny fingers, toes, eyes and nose. A thinking brain, a beating heart. That is beautiful. ♥

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Ways to Embrace Your Changing Body

- 1 Read up.**
Learning about normal physical changes that accompany pregnancy can decrease your anxiety about every bump, lump or symptom.
- 2 Think baby-centric thoughts.**
Focusing on how your baby is developing and what he or she can do will take your attention away from the size of your thighs.
- 3 Leverage assets.**
If pregnancy has given you the cleavage you always wanted, enjoy it. Your spouse will probably love your new curves even more than you do!
- 4 Get fit.**
Eating well and exercising boost feel-good chemicals in your body and fight bloating and fatigue. Good self-care is the best gift you can give your baby.
- 5 Dress Up.**
Invest in a few pieces of clothing — perhaps a wrap dress and a jacket — that fit well and feel fabulous. Buying clothes too big will make you feel frumpy.

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