Managing Eating Disorder Symptoms in Pregnancy

It is important to eat healthily during pregnancy to meet the increasing physical demands on your body and to support your baby’s development. If you are pregnant and have an eating disorder, you may find it difficult to have a healthy balanced diet. This information leaflet includes suggestions on how to manage some common symptoms of eating disorders, which you may find useful. We also recommend that you seek support and treatment from a healthcare professional.

For concerns about food restriction

When you become pregnant, you may start to notice changes to your shape even before your weight changes very much, such as your waist and breasts may become bigger. If you feel very sensitive about these changes, it can make it difficult to not restrict your eating if this is how you would usually respond to changes in your shape.

Here are some suggestions on how to manage these feelings:

- Read the Weight Change in Pregnancy leaflet as it may help you to understand how essential healthy weight gain is for the development and growth of your baby.

- You could make a list of reasons why it is important for you to eat well and have it with you as a reminder when you need it.

- If you experience nausea or vomiting try not to let it be a reason for eating less. Morning sickness will not harm your growing baby if your body’s nutrient stores are good and you eat well at other times of the day when you feel better. There are helpful suggestions on how to manage nausea and morning sickness on the NHS website. We recommend you contact your GP or midwife immediately if you do experience severe nausea and vomiting as you can become severely dehydrated.

For concerns about binge eating

If you usually binge eat, you may be unsure of how to cope with the urge to binge as you may feel hungrier during pregnancy than you usually would, especially in the second trimester.
Here are some suggestions on how to manage these feelings:

- Try to eat several small meals over the course of the day so you are less likely to have times when you get excessively hungry. It is helpful to choose meals and snacks that feel substantial; you can use the list below to help you choose which foods to eat.
  - You can have between 5-8 servings of fresh fruit and vegetables a day. Be aware that more than this can make it difficult to eat other foods necessary for a healthy balanced diet.
  - Choose low Glycaemic Index (GI) foods as they can help you to feel full, such as porridge, granary and seeded bread, oatcakes, beans, pulses, pasta, and fresh fruit.
  - Choose hot instead of cold food and drinks as they can feel more filling because you will be slower to eat and drink them, such as hot milky drinks, vegetable soup, and porridge.

- Most people find they use foods for binge eating that are quick and easy to eat so try to make sure you have healthy snack food available, which will do no harm even if you overeat them sometimes, such as breakfast cereals, muesli, bread, cereal bars, cheese, oatcakes, peanut butter, hummus and milk desserts like tinned rice pudding.

- It can be helpful to plan an activity to do straight after each meal and snack, such as having a relaxing bath, going for a walk or listening to music, and in a space where there is no food available. It may help to occupy your hands and attention with an activity, such as knitting, drawing, sewing or practising a musical instrument.

For concerns about purging

Vomiting and using laxatives can interfere with the levels of electrolytes in your blood (salts such as sodium and potassium), cause blood sugar levels to fall and cause dehydration. The risk of these effects increases as the baby is growing and making greater demands on your body. These effects can be harmful to you and your baby so pregnancy is a particularly important time to cope with feeling like you want to purge.

Here are some suggestions on how to manage these feelings:

- If you usually purge following binge eating, the suggestions above on how to manage binge eating may be helpful as if you eat healthy foods, even when you overeat them you may find you are less likely to want to purge.
• You could make a list of things that are good distractions for you and help you to feel calmer, such as having a relaxing bath or going for a walk, and use the list to help you get through moments when you want to purge.

• If you find that you do purge, it’s important to replace the fluid and potassium loss by having milk or fruit juice. You may find it helps to mix fruit juice with an equal amount of water as this can be more comfortable in your stomach.