



# purging during pregnancy

## The secret life of an eating-disordered mom

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AS TOLD TO STEFANI JACKENTHAL

I DIDN'T GLOW. I wasn't gorgeous. I was nine months pregnant. And after eating a baby-greens salad with grilled chicken for lunch, I rushed to the master bathroom of our apartment, stuck my finger down my throat, and threw it all up. I knew it was wrong. I knew I could harm the baby. But it happened with the deadly speed of a car accident—there was no time to react or stop.

All I cared about was that I was scared and that vomiting would make me feel more in control of a body that had drastically changed during pregnancy. Restricting what I ate always made me feel powerful. As a child, I had pushed my food around my plate to make it look like I was eating, and by my early teens, I was calculating every calorie crossing my lips. It was my source of strength for much of my >>

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life—even while I languished in bed at an eating-disorders (ED) center in Louisville, KY, when I was 19 years old.

“I’m not that thin,” I kept telling the nurse who was stuffing a feeding tube up my nose. My 5’5” body weighed 81 pounds. I spent the first month at the center pissed off and uncooperative, barely speaking. When I realized they weren’t letting me out until I reached 95 pounds, I forced myself to eat just enough to be released.

It wasn’t that I didn’t like food. I would often spend two or three hours roaming supermarket aisles, picking up cans of Spaghetti-O’s, boxes of Twinkies, and frozen Swanson dinners, studying each ingredient list like it was a textbook. It made me feel strong to know I wouldn’t be the one eating the contents of those packages. The ritual was comforting—except for the time a security guard followed me, thinking I was shoplifting.

Although I would have been reluctant to admit it while I was at the ED center, I picked up strategies there that helped me maintain my weight for the next three years. Slowly, I reached 105 pounds as I got involved in sports, moved up in my job in the managed-care division of a large New York City hospital, and met my husband, Greg. On the occasions when I’d freak out about the butter melting on my salmon when I’d asked for it to be grilled dry, I was usually able to slow down and recognize that the food frenzy probably wasn’t about the fat but was more likely about a tight deadline or a huge Amex bill.

I considered myself recovered, but anxieties about my body started creeping back when the discussion of children came up between Greg and me. I was concerned about surrendering my body for nine months and getting fat, but I’d talk myself down about it by remembering that friends—including some with eating disorders—didn’t always get huge during pregnancy.

## Are you at risk?

“We’ve seen more pregnant women with eating disorders in the past two years than ever before,” says Heather Silversmith, R.D., of the Renfrew Center in Coconut Creek, FL. No one knows whether the problem is becoming more prevalent (the new societal pressure to look hot while pregnant may be a factor) or whether women are just more willing to deal with it openly.

But it is clear that a lot of the advice geared toward such women by well-meaning doctors and pregnancy groups just isn’t all that helpful. One organization advises pregnant anorexics and bulimics to “achieve and maintain a healthy weight” and “inform your health-care provider you’ve been struggling with an eating disorder.” As if it were that easy.

Fortunately, some websites and support groups get it, and provide what you need:

### ■ [something-fishy.org](http://something-fishy.org)

The creators of this site don’t let you get away with your own BS. The site is rich with tips for dealing with the disorder, though it contains no specific strategies for pregnancy.

### ■ [nationaleatingdisorders.org](http://nationaleatingdisorders.org)

The National Eating Disorders Association can get you to an eating-disorders professional in your area.

### ■ [eatingdisordersanonymous.org](http://eatingdisordersanonymous.org)

This is an excellent way to locate a 12-step eating-disorders program near you.

To stay calm until your appointment or group meeting, the U.S. Department of Health recommends taking prenatal yoga (it focuses you on your breathing, not on your appearance), educating yourself (knowing what to expect with pregnancy helps you feel more in control), and, if you can, focusing your energy on your baby’s body and its development rather than your own.

Plus, I never really thought I could conceive, due to my sporadic menstrual cycle (my period appeared every six months or so for a day or two of light spotting). And if I did, I was worried that my pelvis might break during pregnancy. A combination of heredity and screwed-up eating meant my bones were like those of a 70-year-old woman. Over the past dozen years, I’ve had 21 stress fractures. After an experimental, 18-month bone-rehab program, doctors said I should be able to carry a baby to term, but I wasn’t convinced. Neither were my friends, who demanded to know, “Why would you risk this? Why not adopt?”

Call it fate or carelessness, but before we were seriously trying, I was pregnant. As I watched the home-pregnancy test turn pink, I felt as if I were breathing through a cocktail straw. “I can’t be pregnant,” I panicked. It was as if the inevitable weight gain would be a betrayal of everything I’d worked so hard to maintain for so long.

Six weeks into the pregnancy, I started bleeding and had a miscarriage. I was upset, then secretly relieved; the fear of getting fat haunted me. And what if I screwed up the kid? If I could barely feed myself (dining out with me could be like a scene from *When Harry Met Sally*), how was I going to nurture a baby?

Overcome by his paternal urges, Greg wanted us to try again. I realized I envisioned our life including kids, so I agreed—and got pregnant immediately. My doctor warned me it would be a high-risk nine months. When she told me that I’d have to get frequent ultrasounds, refrain from vigorous exercise, and, of course, eat properly, an unexpected anger erupted from somewhere deep inside me. Her admonishments >>



brought up a feeling of powerlessness I hadn't experienced since the Louisville center. How dare she!

I listened politely, picking at my dry cuticles (dry skin was a chronic condition I'd developed from not eating enough fat). I knew what I needed to do, so I started a food diary and wrote down everything I ate each day—from

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oatmeal and a banana for breakfast to salad for lunch and even three almonds and a handful of raisins in the afternoon. I'd review it at night to reassure myself I was in control and eating enough, but not excessively.

By the second trimester, when I'd gained the recommended 10 pounds, my belly popped, and I spiraled out of control. I felt weak, vulnerable, and just plain bad about myself—I was too exhausted to exercise (and I had been used to doing a lot of it). I tried not to look in mirrors. Friends with eating disorders had warned me about weight gain, but no one had told me about the haunting feelings of being sucked into a tailspin as the scale spiked.

Desperate for a way to manage the chaos, I'd eat half of my turkey sandwich at lunch and toss the other half so as not to overindulge. I became more selective than usual when making a salad, choosing only super low-fat items such as veggies and grilled chicken, turkey, or tofu. I picked at bagels, ate a few spoonfuls of nonfat cottage cheese, and had limited bites of an energy bar. Since I'd dramatically cut back on my exercise, it seemed only rational to curtail my calories as well. Ignoring the deep hunger that usually hit around 10 a.m. made me feel strong

and secure. When I was ravenous, I'd nibble on baby carrots or a few almonds to take the edge off, biting them in half—an anorexic trick, like cutting food into tiny pieces, to make the rations last longer. It's part compulsion and part fooling yourself and others into thinking you're eating plenty. I kept trying to remind myself that this

would be only nine months of my life, but these months were critical to my child's development. Still, overeating often felt life-threatening.

By the last few weeks, I lost it. I was home alone on maternity leave, having gained 24 pounds. My doctor said my weight was acceptable, but I was so obsessed about getting bigger and bigger that I couldn't focus on any activity—be it e-mail, bills, or even TV—for more than three minutes without getting interrupted by thoughts of how fat I was growing.

That's when I purged. I couldn't tell Greg. I knew pregnancy wasn't supposed to be about me, and I knew I could have ruined everything.

Once I calmed down, I called my doctor and told her I'd thrown up—I didn't admit how or why. She said not to worry but to call back if it got worse. It did. I made myself vomit a few more times that week and finally found the strength to call my old therapist for help. I saw her regularly for the remainder of my pregnancy.

We discussed strategies for staying focused on the health of the baby, such as thinking of this last stretch as the sprint at the end of a race (painful, but over quickly).

On March 1, 2005, we had a healthy

7.5-pound boy. Within a month, I lost the baby weight, thanks to postpartum yoga and long walks with the baby carriage in Central Park.

Ten months later, we tried for a second child. After three miscarriages, we saw a fertility specialist, and the insemination technique she used finally worked after two frustrating rounds. This time, I was vomiting so often from morning sickness in the first trimester that I could barely exercise. Surprisingly, it didn't matter. I felt calmer, more in control, even after the nausea subsided. Maybe it's because I lost the weight so quickly after our first child. Maybe it's because I didn't have time to worry about it, since I was busy with a child at home. Either way, I was relieved not to be freaking out when I ate a sleeve of Saltines.

Our daughter was born in June 2007. While my second full-term pregnancy wasn't as rough, I know better than to think my food issues are over. Eating disorders never truly go away. You just learn to manage the food mania so it doesn't take over your life. And you accept the lurking fear that you can snap back into your old habits at any time—or worse, pass them on to your children. Kids are born with natural appetite control; I hope my children retain that skill far better than I did. **mc**

## The benefits of 25-plus pounds

If you're underweight at the beginning of a pregnancy, you should gain 28 to 40 pounds; healthy-weight women should gain 25 to 35.

Keep in mind that most of the weight is functional, not fat:

- 7 to 8 pounds=baby
- 1 to 2 pounds=placenta
- 2 pounds=amniotic fluid
- 2 pounds=maternal breast tissue
- 4 pounds=additional maternal blood
- 4 pounds=fluid in maternal tissue
- 7-plus pounds=maternal fat and nutrient stores

Not gaining enough weight increases the risk of premature labor, low birth weight, delayed fetal growth, respiratory problems, gestational diabetes, miscarriage, and other health problems.