

HHIPBe: Healthy Habits In Pregnancy and Beyond Led by Professor Michelle McKinley

Why did we conduct this trial?

In Northern Ireland (NI) and the Republic of Ireland (ROI), more than half of pregnant women have overweight or obesity at their first routine antenatal appointment, usually when they are around 12 weeks pregnant. If a mother has overweight during pregnancy, or gains too much weight during pregnancy, it can mean there are increased risks for the health of mum and baby, for example, by increasing the chance of needing a caesarean section. There is currently limited support given to women who have overweight or obese at the start of pregnancy in NI or the ROI. We need to address the gap in healthy lifestyle advice suitable for pregnant women with something that is simple, yet based on scientific evidence. 'Ten Top Tips for a Healthy Weight' (10TT) is a leaflet which includes 10 healthy eating and activity habits and has been shown in scientific research to help overweight adults manage their weight over the long-term. The leaflet is unique as it is based on habit-formation which means it builds on the idea of repeating something over and over until it becomes 'second nature'. This makes it an attractive option for use during pregnancy but first it needed to be adapted in line with pregnancy-specific health advice.

This research aimed to adapt the 10TT materials to make them suitable for pregnancy (so becoming the novel but unproven 'Healthy Habits In Pregnancy and Beyond' (HHIPBe) intervention), and then to do a small study to test if it was possible to incorporate the adapted intervention designed, to improve health outcomes, into routine antenatal care and see if it was acceptable to pregnant women.

What did we do?

In NI and the ROI, researchers tested the delivery of the HHIPBe brief, habit-based weight management intervention for pregnant women with overweight and obesity in early pregnancy. The HHIPBe feasibility study was designed to take place in four maternity units: two in NI (Altnagelvin Maternity Unit (Derry/Londonderry); Royal Jubilee Maternity Hospital (Belfast)); and two in ROI (Sligo University Hospital (Sligo); and Our Lady of Lourdes (Drogheda)). Participants in the study were allocated by chance to receive either the HHIPBe intervention (a 15–20-minute conversation with a health professional, supported by a leaflet, logbook and app, plus routine antenatal care) or the control group (routine antenatal care). Women were followed up during their pregnancy and six weeks after having their baby to see how they found the intervention.

What answer did we get?

Overall, the HHIPBe intervention was acceptable to pregnant women living with overweight and obesity. Data supports positive trends in the adoption of healthy behaviours during pregnancy, continuing into the early postpartum period. All women in the intervention group thought the programme should be offered to other pregnant women. All participants would take part in the study again and would recommend the study to other pregnant women. Many women felt that the study should be offered to all pregnant women, regardless of weight status. Despite significant variation across the hospital sites in how antenatal care is delivered, (such as booking appointments, scans and appointment structures), this work revealed that it was possible to implement the intervention and it was feasible and acceptable to clinical staff.

Feedback from health care professionals suggests that they valued the training and support for having weight management discussions provided as part of the HHIPBe study and that it enhanced their knowledge, skills and confidence for discussing weight appropriately.

What should be done now?

We have shown that HHIPBe is acceptable to pregnant women and to healthcare staff. The next steps will be to refine HHIPBe based on suggestions from women and healthcare staff and then do a large study to see if it helps women with positive habit formation in relation to eating well, being active and healthy weight management in pregnancy and beyond.