

Body Image in Adolescent Pregnancy



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ABSTRACT

Study Objectives: To review the existing literature on body image in adolescent pregnancy and explore concepts about the relationship between the two.

Design: A systematic review.

Setting: Peer-reviewed articles were identified through MEDLINE (1946-present) and PsycINFO (1806-November 2013), conducted in any setting.

Participants: Pregnant and postpartum adolescents ages 13–19 y.

Interventions: None.

Main Outcome Measure(s): The outcome measures used in the studies reviewed varied: themes from focus groups, diary entry analysis, Pregnancy and weight gain attitude scale, Edinburgh postnatal depression scale, Parenting stress index, Eating disorder inventory, Tennessee self concept scale.

Results: The search yielded a total of 149 studies, of which 6 were relevant to the specific topic and age group. The very limited research shows a dichotomy in body image perception during pregnancy in adolescence; some studies show an increase in body image disturbance and dissatisfaction during pregnancy in adolescents, and other studies reviewed found that the majority of pregnant adolescents had positive body image and positive attitudes towards weight gain. A bidirectional link between depression and negative body image in adolescent pregnancy is suggested.

Conclusions: The current research exploring the relationship between body image and pregnancy in adolescence is limited, both in quality and quantity. Future research is needed to evaluate longitudinal models that will better inform about potential risk factors for body dissatisfaction during pregnancy in adolescence, including the possible role of depression.

Key Words: Adolescent, Pregnancy, Body image

Introduction

Body image is defined as one's internal representation of his or her outer appearance. Body dissatisfaction is 1 facet of body image, related to discontent with particular aspects of the body.¹ Negative body image is common among women and social pressures regarding thinness contribute significantly to high levels of body dissatisfaction.² Body dissatisfaction is perhaps even more prevalent in adolescent females, given that body image is an important aspect of self-evaluation and self-representation during this dynamic period.³ In addition, the necessary physical changes that occur during puberty, including an increase in total body fat percentage, may distance females from society's unattainable ideal of beauty⁴ and potentially lead to the development of negative self views.

Pregnancy is also associated with changes in body shape and size that influence body image satisfaction. Women have a variety of responses to the physical changes of pregnancy. Retrospective studies suggest that pregnancy weight gain and body shape changes result in a decline in body

satisfaction in adult women.^{5–7} However, other prospective studies suggest that women experience stable or even improved body image satisfaction at certain stages of pregnancy despite weight gain and body shape changes.^{2,8–12} In fact, body image variance throughout pregnancy seems to be trimester-specific²; women are most likely to experience higher levels of body dissatisfaction during early to mid-second trimester compared to less body dissatisfaction during late pregnancy.^{13,14} Pre-pregnancy body image is a strong predictor of body image in late pregnancy and post partum¹⁵; adults who begin their pregnancy with more body image concerns maintain them over time.^{12,16,17}

Body dissatisfaction during pregnancy is a concern because of the potential association with negative behaviors, such as unhealthy dieting, which have been linked to poor pregnancy outcomes like premature delivery and low infant birth weight.^{2,18,19} Body image dissatisfaction in pregnancy is also concerning because it is an important psychological determinant of depressive symptoms during and after pregnancy.^{11,20} A link between body dissatisfaction and depression has also been suggested in nonpregnant youth.²¹ Additionally, there is evidence that depressive symptoms are associated with greater body image dissatisfaction.¹⁶ However, this potential bidirectional interaction between body image and depression in youth is not well delineated, and is even less clear during adolescent

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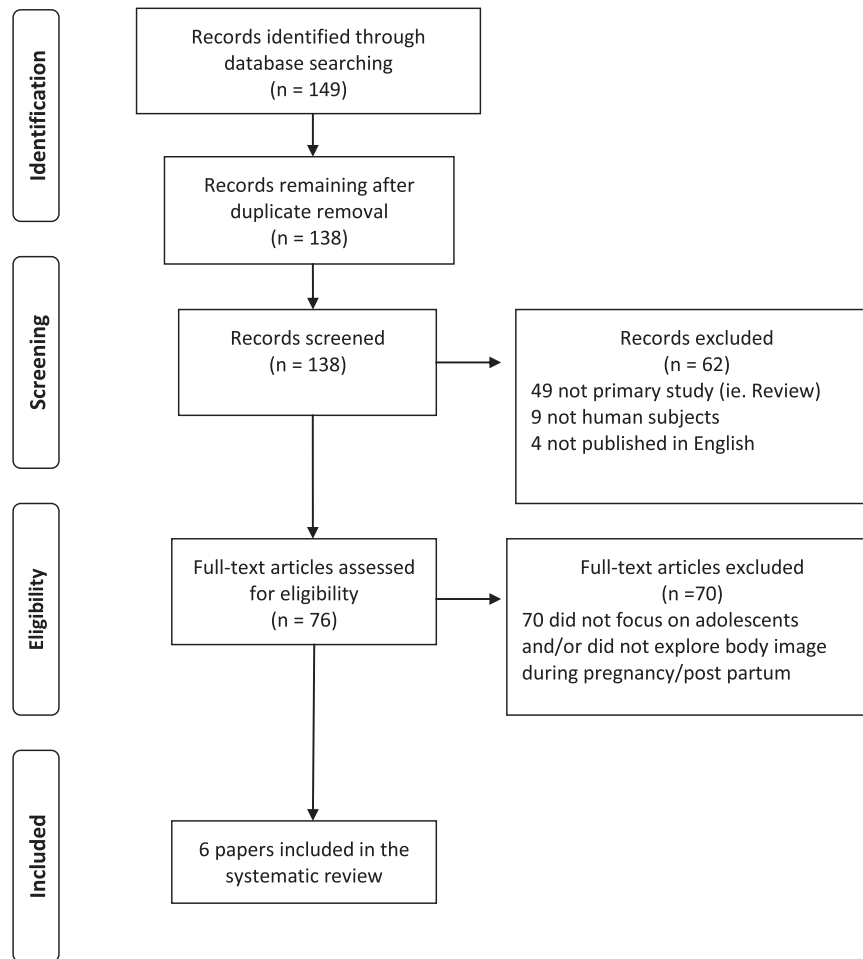


Fig. 1. Flow diagram.

pregnancy. Examining the 2-way relationship between body image and depression during pregnancy is important because of the risks of depression on both mother and child.^{22–24}

While the literature examining the relationship between body image during pregnancy in adulthood is extensive, there is a paucity of research exploring body image during adolescent pregnancy. It is unclear how pregnant adolescents reconcile the new maternal role with the roles of adolescence and the associated emphasis on body image. We aim to review the existing literature on body image in adolescent pregnancy and explore concepts about the relationship between the two.

Methods

Studies were identified through a search of MEDLINE (1946–present) and PsycINFO (1806–November 2013) using the Ovid interface. Search terms included “adolescent,” “pregnancy” and “body image.” No date, language, age or study design limits were imposed on the initial search. The bibliographies of papers deemed relevant were also reviewed for further relevant papers. Eligible studies must (1) have been published in a peer-reviewed journal in English; (2) involve pregnant adolescents or teenage parents; (3) focus on the relationship between body image and

adolescent pregnancy. All authors independently reviewed the studies that met inclusion criteria.

Results

The search yielded a total of 149 studies, 6 of which were relevant to the specific topic and age group (see Fig. 1). Table 1 outlines the studies reviewed in this article, including study design, sample, measures used, and findings.

The literature exploring body image and adolescent pregnancy is limited and there has been no relevant research in almost 10 years. While studying adolescent postpartum body weight concerns using focus groups ($n = 22$), Hellerstedt and Story found that adolescent mothers were dissatisfied with the effects of pregnancy on their bodies.²⁵ For example, many participants were upset about stretch marks and the majority of adolescents were distressed about their higher than desired body weights. Additionally, through a retrospective self-report study, Birkeland et al report that weight gain during pregnancy was positively correlated to weight and body shape disturbance in adolescents ($n = 149$).²⁶ Despite being well informed regarding the necessity of pregnancy weight gain for fetal growth, the majority of participants still considered themselves to be overweight. In a retrospective exploratory study

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