RCOG Scientific Impact Paper on the role of bariatric surgery for improving reproductive health

Key messages

- The paper from the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG) examines the safety and effectiveness of bariatric or weight loss surgery as a way of improving female fertility and reproductive health in obese women.
- The only effective ways to induce long-term weight reduction in women with severe obesity are either significant sustained lifestyle changes or bariatric surgery.
- Overall, bariatric surgery has been shown to improve a woman’s fertility and reduce pregnancy complications.
- Being a healthy bodyweight increases the chances of conceiving naturally and reduces the risk of the problems associated with being overweight or obese in pregnancy. Before considering weight loss surgery, women planning a family who are overweight or obese should lose weight through a healthy, calorie-controlled diet and increased amounts of exercise.
- Although bariatric surgery can improve a woman’s health and the health of her future family, it should only be used as a last resort when all other treatment options, including lifestyle changes have not been successful.

Q&A

How many women in the UK are affected by obesity?

Obesity is a common problem among women of reproductive age. Twenty-six per cent of women in the UK have a body mass index (BMI) of over 30 which means they are clinically obese.

What impact does obesity have on reproductive health?

Obesity has a negative impact on natural conception, miscarriage, pregnancy and the long term health of the mother and child due to an increased rate of birth defects, pregnancy complications and the possibility of disease later in life.

What is bariatric surgery?

Bariatric surgery, also called weight loss surgery, is used to treat people who are severely obese. The three most widely used types of weight loss surgery are:

- Gastric band – where a band is used to reduce the stomach’s size, so a smaller amount of food is required to make you feel full.
- Gastric bypass – where your digestive system is re-routed past most of your stomach, so you digest less food and it takes much less to make you feel full.
- Sleeve gastrectomy – where some of the stomach is removed to reduce the amount of food that’s required to make you feel full.

What are the risks of bariatric surgery?

As with all types of surgery, weight loss surgery carries the risk of complications, some of which are very serious, such as internal bleeding, developing a blood clot inside the leg (deep vein thrombosis), or a blood clot inside the lungs (pulmonary embolism). If a woman gets pregnant during the initial weight loss phase, the fetus may be at risk of nutritional deficiencies.

Who can have bariatric surgery on the NHS?
Current NICE guidelines recommend bariatric surgery only in cases where a patient has a body mass index (BMI) of 40 or above or a BMI of 35 or above and another serious health condition that could be improved with weight loss. In both cases, surgery is only available on the NHS when other treatments, such as lifestyle changes, have not worked.

**Does bariatric surgery improve fertility?**

Existing research has suggested that bariatric surgery does improve female fertility. This includes an improvement in symptoms of polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) which influences fertility, the release of eggs, hormonal changes, sexual activity and libido.

**How long should a woman wait before trying to conceive after bariatric surgery?**

It is advised that a woman waits around 12 – 18 months following bariatric surgery. This is because during the initial weight loss phase, the fetus may be at risk of nutritional deficiencies. Advice on contraception will be provided both before and after surgery.

**Can a woman have IVF following bariatric surgery?**

Yes, it is possible to have fertility treatments following bariatric surgery, however it is recommended that women wait between 12 – 18 months before trying to conceive.

**Is pregnancy safe for a mother following bariatric surgery?**

Most research has shown that bariatric surgery reduces pregnancy complications when compared to untreated obese women or previous pregnancies in the same women. This includes a reduced risk of miscarriage, gestational diabetes, hypertension, macrosomia (large baby) and congenital abnormalities.

Women who have had bariatric surgery will receive specialist care throughout their pregnancy, including dietetic support, weight monitoring, close observation of fetal growth and monitoring for gestational diabetes.

**Are there any risks to the baby following bariatric surgery?**

Most women who have bariatric surgery will have healthy babies, however, some studies have shown that there is an associated increased risk of preterm birth and small for gestational age (SGA) babies in women who have had bariatric surgery. However, other risk factors such as maternal age, number of children and smoking must also be taken into account.

**Additional information**

- RCOG report High Quality Women’s Health Care (2011)
- RCOG Patient Information on why your weight matters during pregnancy and birth
- RCOG Patient Information on small for gestational age babies
- RCOG Patient Information on PCOS
- British Fertility Society website
- NHS Choices information on weight loss surgery