



FACTORS AFFECTING NUTRITIONAL STATUS OF PREGNANT WOMEN

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Abstract

Nutritional status during pregnancy is a pivotal determinant of both maternal and fetal health outcomes. A multitude of factors influences the nutritional status of pregnant women, including socioeconomic status, educational background, cultural practices, access to healthcare, and individual dietary habits. This paper explores these factors in detail, emphasizing their impact on maternal nutrition and subsequent pregnancy outcomes. Understanding these influences is crucial for developing effective interventions and policies aimed at improving maternal and fetal health globally. By examining the interplay of these determinants, this study provides insights into strategies for enhancing prenatal nutrition and ensuring healthier pregnancies.

Keywords : Nutritional status, socioeconomic status, health outcomes and pregnancies

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Introduction

Pregnancy is a critical period characterized by significant physiological and nutritional demands to support the growth and development of the fetus and maintain the health of the mother. Adequate nutrition during this time is essential for preventing adverse outcomes such as low birth weight, preterm birth, and maternal complications, which can have long-lasting effects on both the mother and child. The nutritional status of pregnant women is influenced by a complex interplay of various factors, including socioeconomic conditions, educational levels, cultural beliefs, access to healthcare services, and individual dietary habits. Socioeconomic status plays a crucial role in determining access to nutritious food, healthcare services, and overall living conditions that affect dietary intake. Educational background influences a woman's knowledge and awareness of nutritional needs during pregnancy, which in turn affects her dietary choices and health-seeking behavior. Cultural practices and traditional beliefs can either promote healthy eating or impose dietary restrictions that may lead to nutrient deficiencies. Access to healthcare services ensures regular monitoring of nutritional status and provision of necessary supplements and dietary advice. Individual dietary habits, including pre-pregnancy nutrition and supplement use, further impact the nutritional well-being of pregnant women. Understanding the multifaceted factors affecting the nutritional status of pregnant women is essential for developing targeted interventions and policies aimed at improving maternal and fetal health outcomes. This paper aims to explore these factors in detail, highlighting their impact on maternal nutrition and pregnancy outcomes, and providing insights into strategies for enhancing prenatal nutrition and ensuring healthier pregnancies.

Socioeconomic Status:

Income and Food Security- Income is a fundamental determinant of nutritional status, particularly during pregnancy. Women from low-income households often face

food insecurity, which limits their access to a variety of nutritious foods necessary for a healthy pregnancy. Food insecurity can lead to a diet that is high in energy but low in essential nutrients, resulting in deficiencies in vitamins and minerals critical for fetal development and maternal health. Studies have shown that low-income pregnant women are more likely to experience nutritional deficiencies, such as iron, folic acid, and calcium, which can lead to complications like anemia, neural tube defects, and preeclampsia.

Employment and Work Conditions- Employment status and the nature of a woman's work also significantly impact her nutritional status during pregnancy. Women engaged in physically demanding jobs may have higher energy requirements but less time and resources to invest in preparing nutritious meals. Additionally, the stress associated with low-paying and insecure jobs can exacerbate nutritional deficiencies by affecting appetite and eating patterns. Conversely, women with stable employment and adequate income are better positioned to afford a balanced diet and access quality healthcare services.

Education and Awareness- Educational attainment is closely linked to nutritional knowledge and health literacy. Women with higher levels of education are more likely to understand the importance of a balanced diet and the specific nutritional needs during pregnancy. They are also more likely to seek out and adhere to prenatal care guidelines, including the use of nutritional supplements. Education empowers women to make informed choices about their diet and lifestyle, directly impacting their nutritional status and pregnancy outcomes.

Housing and Living Conditions- The quality of housing and living conditions can influence dietary habits and access to nutritious foods. Women living in overcrowded or poor-quality housing may have limited facilities for food storage and preparation, affecting their ability to maintain a healthy diet. Additionally, those living in food deserts—areas with

limited access to affordable and nutritious food—face significant barriers to obtaining a variety of healthy foods. These environmental factors contribute to the overall nutritional status of pregnant women, particularly in low-income communities.

Social Support and Networks- Social support systems and networks play a vital role in ensuring adequate nutrition during pregnancy. Family and community support can provide emotional, financial, and practical assistance, such as help with meal preparation and childcare, which can alleviate some of the burdens faced by pregnant women. Strong social networks can also facilitate access to information about healthy eating and prenatal care, further improving nutritional status.

Government and Policy Interventions- Government policies and programs aimed at reducing food insecurity and improving maternal health can have a significant impact on the nutritional status of pregnant women. Programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) in the United States provide essential resources to low-income pregnant women, helping to ensure access to nutritious foods and prenatal care services. These interventions play a crucial role in mitigating the effects of socioeconomic disparities on maternal nutrition. In summary, socioeconomic status is a multifaceted determinant of nutritional status during pregnancy, influencing access to food, healthcare, and education. Addressing these factors through targeted interventions and policies is essential for improving the health and well-being of both mothers and their children.

Educational Background:

Health Literacy- Educational attainment is closely linked to health literacy, which profoundly influences dietary choices and nutritional awareness during pregnancy. Women with higher education levels are more likely to understand the significance of a balanced diet and the specific nutritional needs during pregnancy. They are better equipped to interpret nutritional information, follow dietary guidelines, and recognize the importance of prenatal vitamins and supplements. Health literacy enables pregnant women to make informed decisions about their diet and health behaviors, directly impacting their nutritional status and pregnancy outcomes.

Access to Information- Education provides women with better access to information regarding prenatal nutrition and healthcare services. Educated women are more likely to seek out and utilize resources such as books, websites, and health professionals to learn about the nutritional requirements during pregnancy. This access to information helps them to plan and maintain a balanced diet, ensuring they and their developing babies receive the necessary nutrients.

Attitudes and Beliefs- Educational background can shape attitudes and beliefs about nutrition and health. Women with higher education levels may have more positive attitudes towards healthy eating and a greater appreciation for the role of nutrition in pregnancy. They are more likely to adopt health-promoting behaviors, such as consuming a variety of nutrient-rich foods and avoiding harmful substances like alcohol and tobacco. Education also encourages critical thinking and skepticism towards misinformation, reducing the likelihood of adhering to unfounded dietary practices.

Empowerment and Autonomy

Education empowers women by enhancing their autonomy and decision-making capabilities. Educated women are more likely to take an active role in managing their health and nutrition during pregnancy. They are better equipped to advocate for themselves within healthcare systems, seek out quality prenatal care, and adhere to medical advice. This empowerment translates into better nutritional practices and overall health outcomes.

Socioeconomic Benefits

Higher educational attainment is often associated with better socioeconomic status, which in turn influences nutritional status. Educated women are more likely to have stable employment and higher income levels, providing them with the financial resources to afford a diverse and nutritious diet. They are also more likely to live in environments with better access to healthcare services and nutritious foods, further enhancing their nutritional status during pregnancy.

Intergenerational Impact

The educational background of a mother can have intergenerational effects on nutrition and health. Educated mothers are more likely to value and prioritize education for their children, creating a cycle of improved health literacy and nutritional awareness in future generations. This long-term impact underscores the importance of education as a fundamental determinant of health and nutrition.

Case Studies and Evidence

Research consistently demonstrates the positive impact of education on maternal and child health outcomes. For example, studies have shown that women with higher levels of education are less likely to experience adverse pregnancy outcomes such as low birth weight and preterm birth. They are also more likely to utilize prenatal care services and adhere to recommended dietary practices. These findings highlight the critical role of education in promoting optimal nutritional status during pregnancy.

Challenges and Disparities

Despite the clear benefits of education, disparities in educational attainment persist, particularly among marginalized and low-income populations. Addressing these disparities is essential for ensuring that all pregnant women have the knowledge and resources to achieve optimal nutritional status. This requires targeted interventions, such as educational programs and policies that promote access to quality education for all women. In summary, educational background plays a crucial role in shaping the nutritional status of pregnant women. By influencing health literacy, access to information, attitudes and beliefs, empowerment, and socioeconomic status, education is a key determinant of maternal and fetal health outcomes. Addressing educational disparities and promoting health education are vital strategies for improving prenatal nutrition and ensuring healthier pregnancies.

Cultural Practices:

Dietary Restrictions and Preferences- Cultural beliefs and practices play a significant role in shaping the dietary habits of pregnant women. In many cultures, certain foods are encouraged or discouraged during pregnancy based on traditional beliefs. These dietary restrictions can either benefit or harm maternal and fetal health. For instance, some cultures promote the consumption of nutrient-rich foods such as fish, fruits, and vegetables, which can enhance nutritional status. Conversely, other cultures may impose restrictions on specific foods believed to cause harm, which can lead to

nutrient deficiencies if essential foods like dairy, meat or certain vegetables are avoided without appropriate substitutions.

Traditional Beliefs and Practices- Traditional beliefs surrounding pregnancy and childbirth can influence a woman's nutritional status. Practices such as pica, the consumption of non-food substances like clay, dirt, or chalk, can lead to nutritional imbalances and health risks. In some cultures, pregnant women may be encouraged to eat certain foods thought to improve labor or lactation, which can either enhance or detract from their overall nutritional status depending on the nutritional value of these foods.

Food Taboos- Food taboos are prevalent in many cultures and can significantly affect the dietary intake of pregnant women. For example, in some African and Asian cultures, eggs and certain types of fish are avoided during pregnancy due to beliefs that they may cause harm to the fetus or complicate childbirth. While some taboos are based on valid concerns, others lack scientific evidence and may unnecessarily limit the intake of essential nutrients.

Cultural Celebrations and Ceremonies- Cultural celebrations and ceremonies often involve specific foods that can impact the nutritional intake of pregnant women. Festivals and family gatherings may provide opportunities for pregnant women to consume a variety of foods, some of which may be particularly nutritious. However, these events can also promote the consumption of high-calorie, low-nutrient foods, contributing to poor dietary habits if not balanced with healthier options.

Community Support and Social Norms- Cultural practices often encompass strong community support systems that can positively influence the nutritional status of pregnant women. In many cultures, extended families and communities play a role in ensuring that pregnant women receive adequate nutrition and care. These support systems can provide emotional support, food, and practical assistance, such as help with meal preparation. Social norms and expectations within these communities can also encourage pregnant women to follow healthy dietary practices.

Impact of Urbanization and Globalization- Urbanization and globalization are changing traditional dietary practices, with both positive and negative impacts on nutritional status. While access to a wider variety of foods and improved healthcare can benefit pregnant women, the adoption of Western diets high in processed foods and sugars can lead to nutritional imbalances and increase the risk of gestational diabetes and other complications.

Integrating Traditional and Modern Nutritional Knowledge- Integrating traditional dietary practices with modern nutritional knowledge can help improve the nutritional status of pregnant women. Health professionals can work with community leaders and utilize culturally appropriate educational materials to promote balanced diets that respect cultural practices while ensuring nutritional adequacy. This approach helps bridge the gap between traditional beliefs and contemporary nutritional recommendations, fostering better health outcomes.

Case Studies and Evidence- Numerous studies highlight the impact of cultural practices on maternal nutrition. For example, research in rural India has shown that traditional beliefs and food taboos can lead to inadequate intake of protein and micronutrients among pregnant women, contributing to high rates of maternal anemia and low birth weight. Conversely, studies in Mediterranean cultures

emphasize the benefits of traditional diets rich in fruits, vegetables, and healthy fats, which are associated with better pregnancy outcomes.

Challenges and Interventions- Addressing the influence of cultural practices on maternal nutrition involves several challenges, including overcoming deeply ingrained beliefs and practices, language barriers, and varying levels of trust in healthcare providers. Effective interventions require culturally sensitive approaches that respect traditional practices while promoting nutritional education and healthy dietary changes. Community-based programs, participatory approaches, and collaboration with traditional healers and community leaders are essential for successful interventions.

In summary, cultural practices significantly influence the nutritional status of pregnant women. Understanding and addressing these cultural factors through culturally sensitive interventions and education can help improve maternal nutrition and pregnancy outcomes. Balancing respect for traditional beliefs with evidence-based nutritional guidance is crucial for ensuring the health and well-being of pregnant women and their babies.

Access to Healthcare:

Prenatal Care Services- Access to prenatal care services is crucial for ensuring the nutritional well-being of pregnant women. Regular prenatal visits provide opportunities for healthcare providers to monitor maternal and fetal health, offer dietary advice, and administer necessary supplements such as iron, folic acid, and calcium. Prenatal care also includes screening for conditions like gestational diabetes and hypertension, which can be managed with appropriate dietary interventions. Women who receive consistent prenatal care are more likely to be informed about their nutritional needs and adhere to recommendations that promote a healthy pregnancy.

Health Infrastructure- The availability and quality of health infrastructure significantly impact a pregnant woman's ability to access nutritional care. Rural and underserved areas often lack adequate healthcare facilities, trained personnel, and essential supplies. This gap can lead to insufficient monitoring of nutritional status and delayed interventions for nutritional deficiencies. In contrast, urban areas with better health infrastructure offer more comprehensive prenatal services, including specialized care for high-risk pregnancies and access to nutritionists and dietitians.

Health Insurance and Financial Barriers- Health insurance plays a critical role in facilitating access to prenatal care and nutritional support. Women with comprehensive health insurance are more likely to receive regular prenatal care and necessary nutritional supplements. Financial barriers, such as high out-of-pocket costs for healthcare services and medications, can deter pregnant women from seeking timely care, leading to unmanaged nutritional deficiencies and associated complications. Public health programs and policies that reduce financial barriers to prenatal care can significantly improve maternal nutritional status.

Education and Counseling- Healthcare providers are key sources of information and guidance on prenatal nutrition. Effective education and counseling during prenatal visits can empower women to make informed dietary choices and understand the importance of nutrition for their own health and their baby's development. Counseling on dietary practices, portion sizes, and the benefits of prenatal vitamins can help address nutritional gaps. Group classes and

community-based programs can also enhance knowledge and support healthy behaviors among pregnant women.

Supplementation Programs- Supplementation programs are essential for addressing common nutritional deficiencies during pregnancy. Programs that provide free or subsidized prenatal vitamins and minerals can help ensure adequate intake of critical nutrients. For example, iron and folic acid supplementation is widely recommended to prevent anemia and neural tube defects. Vitamin D and calcium supplements are also important for bone health. The success of these programs depends on their accessibility, adherence by pregnant women, and integration with broader prenatal care services.

Barriers to Access- Several barriers can hinder access to healthcare and nutritional support for pregnant women. Geographic barriers, such as distance to healthcare facilities and lack of transportation, can prevent timely access to prenatal care. Cultural and language barriers may also impede communication between healthcare providers and pregnant women, affecting the delivery of nutritional advice and services. Social stigma and discrimination, particularly among marginalized populations, can further limit access to care. Addressing these barriers through targeted interventions and inclusive policies is essential for improving access to healthcare and nutritional support.

Community Health Workers and Outreach Programs- Community health workers (CHWs) and outreach programs play a vital role in extending healthcare services to underserved populations. CHWs can provide home-based care, nutritional counseling, and support for prenatal visits, bridging the gap between healthcare facilities and the community. Outreach programs can also offer mobile clinics and health camps to reach remote areas, ensuring that pregnant women receive essential nutritional care and education.

Integration with Social Services- Integrating healthcare services with social support programs can enhance the nutritional status of pregnant women. Social services that address food insecurity, housing instability, and income support can complement healthcare efforts by addressing the broader determinants of health. Programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) in the United States provide critical support for low-income pregnant women, ensuring access to nutritious foods and healthcare services.

Case Studies and Evidence- Research highlights the impact of access to healthcare on maternal nutrition. Studies have shown that women who receive adequate prenatal care and nutritional counseling are less likely to experience adverse pregnancy outcomes such as low birth weight and preterm birth. In contrast, limited access to healthcare is associated with higher rates of maternal and fetal complications. Evidence from global health initiatives, such as those led by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), underscores the importance of strengthening health systems to improve maternal and child health outcomes.

Challenges and Recommendations- Improving access to healthcare and nutritional support for pregnant women involves addressing systemic challenges such as healthcare infrastructure, policy barriers, and social

Individual Dietary Habits: Pre-Pregnancy Nutrition

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A woman's nutritional status before pregnancy significantly influences her health and the health of her baby. Pre-pregnancy nutrition sets the foundation for a healthy pregnancy. Women who maintain a balanced diet rich in essential nutrients are more likely to start pregnancy in a good nutritional state, which can contribute to better pregnancy outcomes. Pre-pregnancy deficiencies, particularly in micronutrients such as folic acid, iron, and vitamin D, can increase the risk of complications during pregnancy.

Dietary Intake during Pregnancy:

Balanced Diet- A balanced diet during pregnancy is crucial for ensuring that both the mother and fetus receive the necessary nutrients. This includes adequate intake of macronutrients (carbohydrates, proteins, and fats) and micronutrients (vitamins and minerals). Key components of a balanced diet for pregnant women include:

- Fruits and Vegetables: Rich in vitamins, minerals, and fiber, essential for overall health and preventing constipation.
- Whole Grains: Provide energy and are a good source of fiber and important nutrients like iron and B vitamins.
- Proteins: Necessary for fetal growth and development, including lean meats, poultry, fish, beans, and legumes.
- Dairy Products: Important for calcium and vitamin D, essential for bone health.
- Healthy Fats: Found in nuts, seeds, avocados, and fish, important for fetal brain development.

Dietary Patterns and Preferences- Individual dietary patterns and preferences, influenced by cultural, religious, and personal factors, can impact the nutritional intake of pregnant women. Some women may follow specific dietary patterns such as vegetarianism or veganism, which require careful planning to ensure all essential nutrients are obtained. Personal preferences and aversions, which can be heightened during pregnancy, also play a role in dietary choices and can affect nutritional status.

Cravings and Aversions- Cravings and aversions are common during pregnancy and can influence dietary habits. While cravings may lead to the consumption of nutrient-rich foods, they can also result in the intake of high-calorie, low-nutrient foods if not managed properly. Aversions to certain foods can lead to nutrient deficiencies if these foods are primary sources of essential nutrients. Understanding and addressing these cravings and aversions is important for maintaining a balanced diet.

Meal Frequency and Portion Sizes- Meal frequency and portion sizes can significantly impact overall nutrient intake. Eating smaller, frequent meals can help manage common pregnancy-related issues such as nausea and heartburn while ensuring a steady intake of nutrients. Large portions and irregular eating patterns can lead to overeating or undernutrition, both of which can have adverse effects on maternal and fetal health.

Hydration

Adequate hydration is essential during pregnancy. Water is vital for the formation of amniotic fluid, digestion, and the transport of nutrients to the fetus. Pregnant women need to increase their fluid intake to support these physiological changes. While water is the best source of hydration, other fluids like milk and herbal teas can also contribute to overall fluid intake. Caffeinated and sugary beverages should be limited.

Use of Supplements- Supplements play a critical role in ensuring adequate nutrient intake during pregnancy. Prenatal vitamins, which typically contain folic acid, iron, calcium,

and other essential nutrients, are recommended to fill dietary gaps and prevent deficiencies. The use of supplements should complement, not replace, a balanced diet. Adherence to supplement recommendations can be influenced by factors such as awareness, access, and individual preferences.

Managing Common Nutritional Issues

Pregnancy can bring about several common nutritional issues, including morning sickness, constipation, and gestational diabetes. Effective management of these issues involves dietary adjustments and, in some cases, medical intervention:

•**Morning Sickness:** Small, frequent meals and avoiding triggers can help manage nausea and vomiting.

•**Constipation:** Increasing fiber intake through fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, along with adequate hydration, can alleviate constipation.

•**Gestational Diabetes:** Monitoring carbohydrate intake, spreading meals throughout the day, and focusing on low-glycemic foods are important for managing blood sugar levels.

Health Education and Support

Education and support from healthcare providers are crucial for helping pregnant women make informed dietary choices. Prenatal visits offer opportunities for nutritional counseling, addressing concerns, and providing tailored advice based on individual needs and preferences. Support groups and educational resources can also empower women to adopt and maintain healthy dietary habits during pregnancy.

Case Studies and Evidence

Research underscores the importance of individual dietary habits in determining pregnancy outcomes. Studies have shown that adherence to balanced dietary patterns, such as the Mediterranean diet, is associated with reduced risk of complications like preeclampsia and gestational diabetes. Conversely, diets high in processed foods and sugars have been linked to negative outcomes such as excessive gestational weight gain and preterm birth.

Recommendations

•**Tailored Nutritional Counseling:** Personalized dietary advice based on individual needs, preferences, and cultural practices.

•**Education on Balanced Diets:** Emphasizing the importance of a varied diet rich in essential nutrients.

•**Monitoring and Support:** Regular monitoring of nutritional status and support for managing common pregnancy-related nutritional issues.

•**Encouraging Hydration:** Promoting adequate fluid intake as part of overall dietary recommendations.

In conclusion, individual dietary habits play a pivotal role in determining the nutritional status of pregnant women. By understanding and addressing these habits through education, counseling, and support, healthcare providers can help ensure healthier pregnancies and better outcomes for both mothers and their babies. The nutritional status of pregnant women is a multifaceted issue influenced by a variety of factors including socioeconomic status, educational background, cultural practices, access to healthcare, and individual dietary habits. Each of these factors plays a critical role in determining the health outcomes for both the mother and the developing fetus.

Key Findings:

1. Socioeconomic Status:

- Income levels, employment conditions, and housing quality significantly impact dietary intake and access to nutritious foods.
- Financial stability and social support systems enhance the ability of pregnant women to maintain a balanced diet.

2. Educational Background:

- Higher educational attainment improves health literacy, access to information, and adherence to nutritional guidelines.
- Educated women are more likely to make informed dietary choices and seek out prenatal care.

3. Cultural Practices:

- Cultural beliefs and traditions influence dietary habits, food taboos, and practices during pregnancy.
- Integrating traditional practices with modern nutritional knowledge can promote better health outcomes.

4. Access to Healthcare:

- Regular prenatal care and effective health infrastructure are vital for monitoring and supporting maternal nutrition.
- Financial barriers and geographic disparities can limit access to necessary prenatal services and supplements.

5. Individual Dietary Habits:

- Pre-pregnancy nutrition, dietary patterns, meal frequency, and the use of supplements significantly affect nutritional status.
- Managing cravings, aversions, and common pregnancy-related nutritional issues is essential for maintaining a healthy diet.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Addressing the nutritional needs of pregnant women requires a comprehensive approach that encompasses healthcare access, educational initiatives, and culturally sensitive interventions. Policymakers and healthcare providers must work together to:

- Improve access to quality prenatal care and nutritional counseling, particularly in underserved areas.
- Implement programs that provide financial assistance and food security support for low-income pregnant women.
- Develop educational campaigns that enhance health literacy and promote balanced dietary practices.
- Respect and integrate cultural beliefs and practices into nutritional recommendations and healthcare services.
- Support research and evidence-based interventions to continually improve maternal nutrition and health outcomes.

Future research should focus on exploring the specific mechanisms through which these factors influence maternal nutrition and pregnancy outcomes. Longitudinal studies and large-scale surveys can provide deeper insights into the effectiveness of various interventions and policies. Additionally, research should address the unique needs of diverse populations, considering variations in cultural practices, socioeconomic conditions, and healthcare systems.

Conclusion

Ensuring optimal nutritional status during pregnancy is crucial for the health and well-being of both mothers and their children. By addressing the diverse factors that influence maternal nutrition, we can develop effective strategies and interventions that promote healthier pregnancies and improve outcomes for future generations. A

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