

UNDERSTANDING WEIGHT MANAGEMENT AMONG POSTNATAL WOMEN: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF EXPERIENCES AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract: *Postnatal weight retention (PWR) is the change between pre-pregnancy weight and weight after birth. PWR is a risk factor for women of childbearing age to develop obesity. Studies have shown that women who gain weight after childbirth or who do not lose their pregnancy weight are less likely to drop the weight and more likely to suffer from serious health issues. Nonetheless, the prevalence of PWR and obesity among women has kept increasing. Hence, this study aims to explore the experience of postnatal women in Kuantan that shape their weight management behaviours. This study employed a qualitative research study. Nine participants were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling methods. A semi-structured interview was conducted to obtain data on the experience, perceived benefits and perceived barriers of weight management among postnatal women in Kuantan. All findings were analyzed using thematic analysis. Three categories with nine themes were extracted from the data. The study identifies various factors such as kinship support, perceived benefits of losing weight (including nutritious eating habits, physical activity, and body appearance), people's opinions and perceived barriers (such as time constraints, commitment, and maladaptive eating behaviours) that influence postnatal women's ability to control their weight. In conclusion, this study highlights the importance of addressing postnatal weight retention (PWR) as a risk factor for obesity among women of childbearing age. These findings provide valuable insights for developing targeted interventions and support systems to help postnatal women manage their weight effectively and reduce the risk of obesity-related health issues.*

Keywords: *Weight Management; Postnatal; Experience*

Introduction

Postnatal weight retention is defined as the change in weight between pre-pregnancy weight and weight after birth (Nasreddine et al., 2020). PWR is a risk factor for women of childbearing age to develop obesity. Public health interventions, including promoting physical activity and a healthy diet after childbirth, have been introduced to manage the weight of postnatal women (Teh et al., 2021). Nonetheless, the prevalence of PWR and obesity among women has kept increasing. Besides, there is limited literature to understand the realities of postnatal women in a specific community engaging with weight management behaviour after childbirth. Hence, this study aims to explore the experience of postnatal women in Kuantan that shape their weight management behaviour.

Pregnancy complications, such as gestational diabetes, pre-eclampsia, miscarriages, premature births, stillbirths, postpartum haemorrhages and infections, and postpartum depression, are all connected with being overweight or obese at the beginning of the pregnancy and cause complications for the baby as well as a higher chance of newborn mortality and obesity in the children (Mckinley et al., 2018). Hence, it is suggested that weight management among postnatal women is essential to reduce the risk of developing obesity after childbirth and prevent complications in their subsequent pregnancies. Study on weight management among postnatal women in developed countries has already been carried out and documented. In contrast, limited studies on this subject have been reported in developing countries, including Malaysia. To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first in Malaysia to use a qualitative methodology study design.

This study will present the diversity of experiences in weight management among postnatal women. This study could inspire social change among the people in this population. Encouraging postnatal women to lose weight enables them to create a healthy way of life for themselves within their environment. As the population of postnatal women increases in Kuantan, relevant authorities may use the data to increase awareness of obesity among postnatal women. Thus, this study may be Beneficial to the academic audiences for future research and academic inquiry in the focus area. The outcome of this study may assist healthcare professionals in revising the guidelines or framework for postnatal women.

Methodology

Research Design

A qualitative study was conducted using purposive and snowball sampling methods. Purposive sampling, a widely used method in qualitative research, involves selecting participants based on specific study objectives, while snowball sampling, also known as "chain referral", involves recruiting participants based on referrals from previous participants who have experienced the investigated phenomena of interest (Whitehead & Whitehead, 2020).

Setting and Samples

Nine participants were successfully recruited for this study. The participants were recruited following the inclusion and exclusion criteria that have been made. Among the inclusion criteria are women between 18 to 45 years old (childbearing age), postnatal period (within 0 to 18 months after childbirth), living in Kuantan, with informed consent and able to understand and speak English or Malay. The researchers are focused on a particular geographical area to gain a deeper understanding of the population of interest and their experiences.

Measurements and data collection

This study has been conducted from May until June 2023. A semi-structured interview was conducted to obtain data related to the experience, perceived benefits and perceived barrier of weight management among postnatal women in Kuantan. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and by phone call, and the time duration provided for each interview session was approximately 30 minutes to one hour each.

Data Analysis

All findings were analyzed using thematic analysis.

Ethical Considerations

The ethical approval for this study proposal was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IREC 2023-KON/NURF69) on 27th February 2023. Additionally, before conducting an interview session, all participants will obtain informed consent to ensure their willingness to participate. The participants will be briefed on how the interview will be carried out, participants' anonymity, privacy and confidentiality and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Hence, the informed consent will ensure the data is recorded, and the participants' text needs to be kept private by the researcher to ensure the participants' understanding; they must state the purpose and objective of this study.

Results

In our study, we recruited nine postnatal women from the Obstetric & Gynaecology Clinic, Obstetric Ward at SASMEC @ IIUM and around Kuantan to be interviewed regarding their weight management during the postnatal period. As a result, nine themes emerged after the researchers reviewed the transcripts and have been summarized below.

Sociodemographic background

The participants of this study were postnatal women living at Kuantan. Nine participants have been selected in the Obstetric ward, Obstetrics & Gynecology Clinic at SASMEC @ IIUM, and around Kuantan, who took part in this study based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria that have been listed. The participants were 27- 42 years old, living at Kuantan, with education level from STPM, diploma, and degree, the postnatal period up to 11 months, and the average of them have one to four children.

Theme 1: Kinship support

These women believe support is the key to postnatal weight management success. In the interview, nearly all participants said that they provide kinship support, which is husband encouragement for motivating and managing weight after postnatal. These four participants are examples of being supported by their husbands.

"In addition, with my husband's support, I can be confident that I can lose weight. Because my husband always helps prepare food, buy fruits from my sister. I believe that by taking care of my diet and moral support from my husband, I can lose weight and regain my pre-pregnancy weight."

(P5)

"You don't show it to people, but it's your husband who sees it, right? But it's okay if we try a little bit. It's trying to make my husband impress with me."

(P6)

"Second, for the husband. When we are thin, we want to look at our husbands right? Hehehe."

(P7)

"...I haven't motivated myself for a long time because in the past, I always complained to my husband that I was fat. But my husband suggested a way to lose weight, stop taking birth control pills, then conceive, give birth, and then repair the body."

(P9)

However, kinship support from family that causes participants to want to control their weight can be seen in participant 1, participant 4 and participant 9.

"My family is okay. It's just that my late mother said that we are fat not necessarily sick, we are thin not necessarily healthy. We see that she is thin and looks slim, but we don't know if she is healthy or not. Some of us see people who look fat, they must have many diseases, but in fact they are healthy"

(P1)

"The family is all big. But if like me, it's okay and don't become obese, that's why I'm still in control of myself. If I join them, it's hard for me to lose weight."

(P4)

"Family members. When we gather with family every weekend, some are thin, and some are fat. But there are those who say, "Eat hard now, your body is full and you're already pregnant", while at that time you weren't pregnant, so we're like "hey, what's wrong?". Haha. So, there's a lot around us, our environment in terms of family, friends, encouragement from my husband can motivate me to continue to lose weight."

(P9)

Theme 2: Psychological

The participants admitted that they primarily rely on their emotional will effects if they are thin and healthy while caring for their babies. Among the examples of such answers were from participant 2, participant 3, and 5.

"First, if the weight does not drop, it will affect us emotionally. It will feel a change in his body. Second, if we are not comfortable with our bodies, we cannot take care of the baby."

(P2)

"Good. It's good that we won't feel tired quickly. Because when we are obese, we feel tired, tired, and just want to sleep, when our body is okay, it is easy to do some work. also, happy."

(P3)

"Even if we are overweight, it will interfere with our emotions and it will not be the best if we are used to the ideal weight, when our weight increases. We are not sure of ourselves. That's why I'm determined to lose weight so that my emotions don't get in the way and can affect the people around me."

(P5)

Theme 3: People's opinion

The participants claimed that people's criticism makes them determined to decrease their weight because people keep judging without knowing the struggle of postnatal women to lose weight.

"One more thing, maybe people around me tell me "Hey, you gain weight when you're pregnant, it's so much that you don't know who it is" like we won't even after giving birth want to stay at the same weight as when we gave birth. So, it's like after giving birth, people want to say "haaa this is the one I know."

(P1)

"When the weight is too heavy, the eyes look, so when we are heavy, we will lose self-confidence. But don't judge mothers after giving birth because we don't know how much she struggles to lose weight. Everyone has a different body metabolism. When we lose weight, we become healthy, energetic and we avoid people judging us."

(P7)

"In the past, when I met a client, the client said, "I want to increase my body" "Now I'm a little fat?" "Now it's full, eh?", all that motivates us to pursue how to lose weight. So, when I go to work, people think "Oh, I'm already thin."

(P9)

Theme 4: Nutritious eating habits

Most study participants also stated that nutritious eating habits, which are healthy food with the following portion sizes, will help them manage their weight, like eating vegetables and fruit, following the food pyramid and reducing sweet drinks.

"Just diet and cut sugar. I do half quarters because that's what works for me. Intermittent fasting does not work. Now I can't do intermittent fasting because of breastfeeding. So, I practice half quarters and cut sugar."

(P2)

"Control eating... no dinner, lack of sweets or fasting."

(P3)

"I will make sure to eat healthy food. Because that way we can maintain an ideal weight and then our health will improve."

(P5)

"How do I drink less sugary water. It's also a sweet drink. Haha. The portions are small, and I don't eat at night."

Some participants said that controlling diet during confinement helps to decrease weight because they need to care about food to maintain or reduce their body weight after pregnancy.

"Now abstinence, abstinence really helps to lose weight. But after abstaining from weight, I maintain until now I just take care of eating. I only eat once a day."

(P2)

"Hmmm... During abstinence you must take care to eat right. People say you can't drink ice. Then eat before night before 7 o'clock. Eat a little but often."

(P3)

"Abstinence time, really abstinence. No drinking sugary water or fried food. It's just boiled and baked soup."

(P6)

"One more thing, take care of your diet during abstinence as well, I eat properly because people say that if we observe abstinence, we can lose weight and indeed my food is like an abstinent person, there are stews and roasts. Indeed, within a month, I maintain abstinence even though people say there is no need to abstain but it's okay if you want to do it. If you want to get an ideal weight, take care of your diet during abstinence, because after abstinence, our diet goes to the sea."

(P7)

".... I have been following a diet for generations. Like the first 10 days or the first 2 weeks, you really must eat. For the first 10 days, you can't eat gravy, just plain rice, and grilled fish. After that, if you feel like eating grilled chicken? grilled meat? can only eat. After that, he had a suggestion that when eating, only one small glass of water and rice should not be added."

(P9)

Theme 5: Participation in physical activity

Based on the interview with participants, some of the participants are committed to exercise during weekdays or weekends to help decrease their weight even though they need to bring a child together and exercise during their free time.

"If you want to exercise outside, bring the little one, it's a little hard. If you take it to the park, you can take it for a walk around the park. If you want to stay and go jogging, what's the trouble like who's taking care of it?"

(P6)

"But after 40 days, I will start working out, jogging or running around the park but not heavy exercise."

(P9)

Theme 6: Body appearance

Most participants stated that clothes are the main motivation for postnatal women to control their weight during the postnatal period.

"Shirt. It's like a size M shirt and we'll see. That's our passion for thinness. Our clothes are our lifestyle. When the size is big, how do you dress up? Like this, the pants are tight. Hehehe."

(P3)

"After that, if we are already thin, we can wear all our clothes again. Like my experience, even the size of the old shirt can be worn again. So, there are many options there""

(P5)

"It's a shirt. Ouch, I must go out shopping to buy another size shirt. Then when we are used to being thin, don't want to get fat. It's hard to be stylish."

(P6)

"In the past, when I wanted to wear that shirt, didn't fit, this didn't fit either." "Yes, in terms of clothes, in terms of our career because when we work because I have work outside and inside. When we meet a client, the client will look at us in terms of appearance, so those things are complaints from customers to motivate us to lose weight, take care of our skills."

(P9)

Theme 7: Time-consuming

Nonetheless, there will be barriers in weight management among postnatal, which is time-consuming, as shared by participant 1, participant 3, participant 5 and participant 6.

"Time constraints, when we work and have children, if before having children we could jog because there is no commitment now that we have a commitment to the child can also be an obstacle."

(P1)

"Hmmm... time. When we are tired from work and sleep. Then when you wake up just eat, when you're tired. What's more, when you have children, it takes time to exercise."

(P3)

"When we have a baby, we want to exercise, even jogging, the time is limited, after all, the baby is still small, right? Can't stay at all."

(P5)

"The time is the same. It's like a weekend time it's have a time, but like workday, it's a little hard because when you get from work, you're little tired."

(P6)

". After that, the challenge is, if you want to exercise, there is no time with the constraints of work, even if there is time but that time is used for rest"

(P7)

Theme 8: Commitment

The study participants also stated that breastfeeding is one of the perceived barriers to losing weight because breastfeeding makes postnatal women feel very hungry in a short time.

"Because I am fully breastfeeding and always feel hungry. So, it's a bit difficult when you always want to eat and there are a lot of taboos that parents set so what we want to eat is quite stressful. Sometimes I always eat sneakily. Hehehe."

(P2)

"When we breastfeed, we feel hungry easily. So, we start to feel like eating and have the potential to eat a lot, eat often and must feel like eating"

(P5)

"But I can lose weight by taking care of my diet. I also breastfeed my child so it feels hungry quickly, so if he drinks a lot and there is no need to worry, it will come out by breastfeeding"

(P7)

"The obstacle is because we are breastfeeding, we feel hungry every hour"
(P9)

Participants in this study also believed that care to newborns is an obstacle to weight management after postnatal because the baby still needs to depend on the mother.

"...if before having children we could jog because there is no commitment now that we have a commitment to the child can also be an obstacle"
(P1)

"I don't have time to exercise because I'm taking care of the children."
(P3)

"But I rarely jog, but since I was little, it's been difficult."
(P4)

"Because I don't have time to exercise with small children anymore. "
(P7)

"Nothing. I don't have time to exercise. If you want to exercise, just go to hospital by walking. If you really want to exercise, don't have time and you can't afford it because you have a small child."
(P8)

Theme 9: Maladaptive eating behaviour

Most study participants also stated that maladaptive eating behaviors are barriers that increase their weight, especially they cope with their stress with eating.

" So, it's a bit difficult when you always want to eat and there are a lot of taboos that parents set so what we want to eat is quite stressful. Sometimes we always eat sneakily. Hehehe. "
(P2)

"The obstacle is food. Can't watch eating. If I feel stress, I also find food to eat That's just not possible."
(P4)

"Hmmm... the challenge is the food. Because I handle my stress by eating and walking. Like walking and then going to eat. My bad habits. Other people don't eat when stressed. But when I'm stressed, I feel like eating. "
(P8)

Another barrier that might be faced related to maladaptive eating behaviour is food craving, where the postnatal woman feels want to eat, especially at the end of the confinement period. A few participants talked about obstacles to controlling weight: food cravings.

"So, we start to feel like eating and have the potential to eat a lot, eat often and must feel like eating"
(P5)

"More irregular eating. People say eat little but often, right? But we're going to combine breakfast and lunch. There is no time to eat lunch and then. Didn't have time to take a little but often. It takes the same amount of time, but we take that portion as a heavy meal."

(P6)

"...Food. When we eat that, we don't want to eat fruits, vegetables, it's hard to practice because we eat and cook what we have at home. There is none, do you want to increase the stock of fruits everyday and eat it's available and it's a little difficult to eat those fruits and vegetables" "Don't... Sometimes, I don't even have time to cook it, so I buy it outside. It's the food is outside, it's usually easy, but you must eat it anyway."

(P7)

In summary, Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework summarising all nine themes derived from the interviews with all participants.

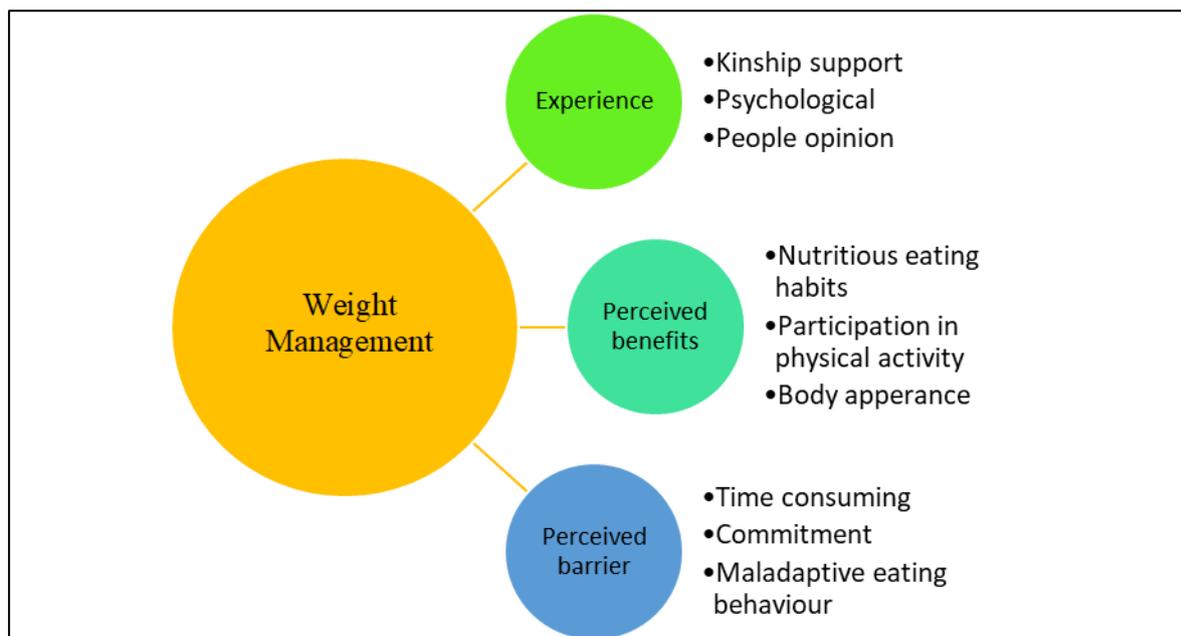


Figure 1: Themes and categories identified through interviews with participants.

Discussion

Experience in weight management.

Kinship support refers to the help, attention, and emotional support provided by family members or close friends. It encompasses a network of relationships and interactions that make up a family or extended family system. When it comes to weight management, participants have reported that kinship support involves their spouses encouraging them to achieve their goals. According to Timmermans et al. (2020), all postnatal women expressed a desire for their loved ones to support their efforts in leading healthy lifestyles. Some women also chose group-based therapies to form new connections with other women who were going through similar situations and to provide each other with ongoing support in preventive measures. In this study, postnatal

women in Kuantan expressed the need for support from their husbands to help them stay motivated in their weight control efforts.

Having support from family members is incredibly important when it comes to losing weight and maintaining a healthy lifestyle, especially for postnatal women. Family members can provide emotional support, encouragement, and motivation throughout the weight loss journey. When family members adopt healthy habits, it creates a supportive environment. Seeing others in the family make healthy choices can motivate and reinforce their efforts. Research by While Kaur et al. (2022), Saarikko et al. (2021), and others have found that strong family support helps postnatal mothers lose weight. In this study, family support was shown to reinforce healthy lifestyle habits and aid in weight management among postnatal women in Kuantan.

Achieving and maintaining a healthy weight after childbirth has multiple benefits, including the improvement of emotional well-being. Losing weight and achieving personal health goals can boost self-esteem and body image, leading to a positive self-perception. This can help mothers feel more confident in their appearance, which can significantly impact their overall emotional state. In addition, losing weight can increase energy and vitality, helping mothers keep up with the demands of caring for their baby, including feeding, playing, and attending to their needs. Studies have shown that enhanced mental health conditions, like postnatal depression, are related to better mood and body image while losing weight. On the other hand, higher gestational weight gain may negatively affect mood and physical quality of life during pregnancy. Therefore, proper weight management after postpartum plays a significant role in facilitating positive emotions in mothers, impacting their ability to care for their babies effectively. It is essential to maintain a healthy weight range and adopt a balanced approach to weight loss, if necessary. Failure to address weight management can lead to many emotional challenges for mothers. Therefore, self-care and emotional well-being are critical aspects of motherhood, and taking care of mothers emotionally allows them to be in a better position to care for and nurture their babies.

Perceived benefits of losing weight.

Eating nutritious foods that are high in important nutrients is crucial for postnatal women to support their overall health and well-being. Portion sizes also play a significant role in maintaining a balanced diet and healthy weight. The amount of food consumed in a single serving can vary depending on the type of food and specific dietary guidelines. Following proper portion control during a meal can help decrease weight. According to Dalrymple et al. (2018), a diet-only strategy is an effective way to reduce weight in general and manage weight during pregnancy. Additionally, adhering to healthy lifestyle recommendations, such as eating fruits and vegetables and exercising regularly, can reduce the risk of becoming obese during pregnancy (Fair et al., 2022). However, strategies aimed at reducing postpartum weight retention and promoting healthy weight after delivery should focus on improving dietary and physical activity habits (Teh et al., 2021). Therefore, adopting a mindful portion control approach, promoting healthier eating habits, and supporting weight management goals can help postnatal women achieve their weight loss goals.

The study conducted by Fok et al. (2016) highlights that confinement is a significant characteristic of Asian populations. This confinement period occurs immediately after childbirth, during which the mother takes rest, recovers, and adjusts to the physical and psychological changes after giving birth. It is a common practice across many cultures and varies according to cultural traditions and personal preferences. Chen et al. (2023) suggest that

Asian women should restrict themselves for 30 to 40 days after giving birth, limiting their activities and staying indoors. However, some participants have reported that confinement helps reduce weight because they are able to take care of themselves and control their eating habits. Nevertheless, the frequent consumption of fatty meals during confinement may lead to increased weight gain, as highlighted by Chu (2021).

Maintaining a healthy weight after pregnancy can have numerous benefits for a mother's appearance. However, it is essential to approach weight management healthily and in balance, taking into account individual circumstances. Some women find motivation to lose weight and achieve their weight loss goals by aiming to fit into smaller-sized clothes. Wearing smaller-sized clothes can indicate improved health and well-being, making them feel confident and satisfied with their appearance. This can significantly influence their self-esteem and overall well-being. As stated by Fair et al. (2022), some women were already adhering to their weight management before and during pregnancy, noting how specific clothing fits or routinely weighing themselves to keep track of their weight gain. According to Murray-Davis et al. (2019), many women plan to eat healthily, exercise, reduce weight, and get back in shape during the postpartum period while juggling their regular commitments and taking care of a baby. Clothing can be a powerful motivator for losing weight during the postnatal period, and changes in body shape and size can impact a woman's self-esteem and confidence.

In addition, achieving their desired weight or appearance goals after pregnancy can help postnatal women feel better about themselves. Feeling comfortable and satisfied with their body can have a positive impact on their well-being and mental health. Changes in body shape and size brought on by weight loss can benefit how one feels about their body. A positive self-image and self-confidence can be enhanced by feeling more at ease and content with one's physical appearance. However, out of nine participants, only two stated that they feel confident if they are slimmer and more confident when meeting clients at work. This statement is also supported by a study from Avery et al. (2016), which found that 76.6% of 1015 women in the United States listed "to increase my self-confidence" as their primary motivation for weight loss. Additionally, 66.5% cited "to reduce the weight I acquired during my pregnancy," and 85.2% mentioned "to improve how I feel about my body size and shape." This research also showed that the three most powerful motivations cited were changing one's body shape or size, gaining more self-assurance, and decreasing pregnancy weight. However, only one of these factors was significantly and positively connected with weight loss that improved overall health.

Perceived barrier of control weight

Controlling weight after giving birth can be a challenging task that requires a considerable amount of time and effort. Postnatal women have many responsibilities to manage, including caring for their newborns, household chores, and work commitments. Due to this lack of time and energy, it becomes difficult to engage in physical exercise and food preparation, which are vital for maintaining a healthy weight. According to Mckinley et al. (2018), postpartum women face several obstacles such as lack of time, energy, and space to engage in physical exercise, which can hinder their weight loss journey. The time-consuming nature of postnatal responsibilities can be a significant barrier to weight control among postnatal women.

Maladaptive eating behaviors refer to problematic eating patterns that can negatively affect a person's physical and mental health. These behaviors are characterized by an unhealthy relationship with food, irregular eating habits, and a lack of balance and moderation. Some people turn to food as a coping mechanism to deal with emotional states such as stress, sadness,

or boredom, which can lead to excessive and mindless eating. A study by Bijlholt et al. (2020) found that there is a strong relationship between gestational weight gain and emotional eating, food cravings, disinhibition, restrained eating, external eating, and lower levels of intuitive eating. Furthermore, women who become pregnant while overweight or obese are more likely to experience food anxiety and gain more weight after childbirth, according to Faria-Schützer et al. (2018). However, intensive lifestyle changes leading to weight loss have been shown to improve mental health and quality of life (Altazan et al., 2019). In short, maladaptive eating behaviors, particularly the use of food as a coping mechanism during stressful times, can be significant obstacles to weight management for postnatal women in Kuantan.

Cravings are a common experience for humans, and postnatal women may experience them due to hormonal changes, physical recovery, sleep deprivation, and emotional adjustments. However, when cravings lead to maladaptive eating behaviors, managing weight can become a challenge. In fact, three out of nine participants reported that food cravings were their biggest hurdle in losing weight after giving birth. Food cravings can make it difficult to follow a healthy eating plan and may encourage the consumption of excessive calories or unhealthy foods. Interestingly, bad eating habits were more prevalent among the research participants after their confinement, even though their meals were carefully prepared with regulated portions and a variety of balanced foods. Therefore, food cravings can significantly hinder weight loss among postnatal women.

Conclusion

This study shows that most of the participants were successful in managing their weight during the postnatal period. They were highly motivated to lose weight after pregnancy and had a specific target in mind. Participants also believed that their past experiences with weight management helped them control their body weight. To obtain more comprehensive and significant data, it is recommended to replicate this study on a larger sample size. The study suggests that postnatal women should receive proper guidance during postnatal check-ups to help them control their weight and have a target to aim for.

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