Fat or fertile?

BBC

Commuters rarely give up their seats for pregnant women as they are unsure if they are just overweight, it has emerged. Here, expectant mothers give tips on how to tell the difference.

It's a minefield of mixed signals, indecision, guilt and offence. All played out painfully in public on a crowded bus or train.

Some people are just selfish, yes, but the average commuter would probably give up his or her seat for a pregnant woman, with good grace. It's just not that straightforward.

For a start, he might not have noticed her, and is instead lost in a book or World Cup supplement. Few people repeatedly scan for those more in need of a seat at every stop. And where does his area of responsibility end - shouting distance?

Then there's that nagging doubt - is she pregnant, fat, or just wearing a baggy top?

Whatever the discomfort of offending a pregnant woman by staying seated, is it preferable to the excruciating awkwardness of effectively telling a woman, within earshot of about 20 people, that her tummy is so inflated it looks as if there's a baby inside?

The same dilemmas apply to seated women, of course, but society's expectation to be chivalrous still falls more heavily on men. And women, perhaps, are more adept at spotting the signs.

No wonder some passengers are frozen by agonising indecision. A survey by

gurgle.com, a website owned by Mothercare, says 84% of pregnant women regularly have to stand - and one of the reasons under discussion on its messageboard was that seated commuters don't want to offend the non-pregnant. To help make things clear, Mothercare sells "Baby on Board" badges.

Here are some tips from pregnant women:

1. Listen for huffing and puffing, says Ellie Dixon-Jackson, 33, who is eight months pregnant and lives in Manchester, because your internal organs get a bit squashed. Plus carrying extra weight causes you to feel more out of breath. "I would say however, that it is difficult to gauge with some people until the later months when they are clearly showing a bump. My advice would probably be to say nothing if you are unsure and wait for a clear signal."

2. Belly or back-rubbing are other giveaways, she says, and a coat that doesn't fasten. "My experience on the Manchester Metro has generally been really good. I find leaning back a bit and rubbing the belly and having a tired expression works wonders."

3. Check the feet, says mum-of-two Nifa McLaughlin, editor of gurgle.com. "You won't often find a pregnant woman wearing stilettos or any kind of dangerously high heels. Nope, I'm afraid it's flat ballet pumps, baseball boots or (gulp) Uggs. If she's paired up her work suit with comfortable footwear, or just slippers, then it's a safe bet that she's eating for two."

4. What's she reading? "What with holding her bump, rubbing her back and working tirelessly to keep steady on her feet, she probably isn't actually reading," says Ms McLaughlin. "There will be a book sticking out of her bag, though, and it probably won't be a thriller or the real-life story of a serial killer. Her hormones are all over the place so she's more likely to be sticking to something light-hearted or a spot of chick-lit. There's a big hint if she's reading a pregnancy magazine or baby book."

5. Inflated ankles, says Justine Roberts of parenting website Mumsnet. "Look out for signs of extreme exhaustion and/or ankles the size of cabbages. But if in doubt just go ahead and offer your seat anyway. If she is pregnant she'll be deliriously grateful. If she isn't, then you've just done your good deed for the day anyway."

6. A waddling walk is another sign, says pregnant Joanne Fenwick, 32, from Newcastle. "The tell-tale signs would definitely be the holding or hugging of the bump, even before the bump is visible. Then after about 35 weeks [about eight months pregnant], the waddle takes over. When standing still, women tend to sway from side to side - or at least I do."

7. A well-defined and solid bump will clearly not be squishy fat, says mother-of-two Londoner, Cato Pedder. "In the early months when you just look fat, you don't need to sit down anyway. By the time you do need to sit down, by six or seven months, the bump is so round and defined that only a fool would mistake it for fat. I always found people stood up on buses and trains, especially the elderly, who could do with the seat even more than me. But never on the Tube, even when I was eight months pregnant and looked like I had a hippo up my frock."

Even clearer, of course, would be if more pregnant women asked politely for a seat, rather than suffer in seething silence.

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