

# **Antenatal and Postnatal Depression**



**and other emotional difficulties during  
pregnancy and after birth**

## **What do I need to know?**

You are the most important person in your baby's life. It can be easy to forget about your own needs during pregnancy and in the early months after birth because the main focus is on your baby. As these are the most vulnerable months of your baby's life, it is vital that you are as healthy as possible throughout this period.

Approximately 1 in 5 women experience depression, anxiety, or other emotional difficulties during this period. For some women, these difficulties are not severe and don't last very long. For others, these difficulties become worse which can make it difficult to enjoy motherhood and get on with life.

If you experience these difficulties, it is essential that you are given the right type of support as soon as possible. There are a range of different treatments and services available to help with your recovery.

## **How likely am I to experience difficulties?**

Mental health difficulties during pregnancy and in the months after giving birth can happen to anyone – regardless of background, age, race, life circumstances or past history.

There is no single cause why women (and men) develop mental health difficulties during this period. Common contributing factors are: uncertainty about parenthood, physical complications in pregnancy, a traumatic birth, feelings of disappointment if parenthood is not what you expected, changes in your relationships and social life, lack of sleep, lack of support from friends or family, and any other significant stressful events (eg loss of job, physical illness, relocation, relationship breakdown, bereavement, etc).

You may be at an increased risk if you have experienced previous mental health difficulties or if someone in your family has had mental health difficulties during pregnancy or after giving birth.

## What is antenatal depression?

Depression during pregnancy can be very distressing and hard to predict. Antenatal depression can occur at any point during pregnancy and symptoms may gradually increase over a period of many weeks or they might start suddenly and unexpectedly.

It is estimated that 1 in 7 women will experience persistent symptoms of depression during pregnancy. These symptoms include:

- ▶ Overwhelming feelings of sadness and hopelessness
- ▶ Loss of interest or pleasure in doing things you would normally enjoy
- ▶ Excessive feelings of tiredness and loss of energy
- ▶ Feeling inadequate and unable to cope.

Other possible symptoms may be: irrational anxiety, loss of confidence, significant changes to appetite and sleep, regular tearfulness, uncertainty about being pregnant, or even suicidal thoughts. Many women also feel a pressure to be happy during pregnancy and this can result in feelings of confusion and guilt.

Pregnancy can be a very stressful time and it is normal to feel some emotional difficulties during this period, particularly when you are undergoing hormonal changes related to pregnancy. However, if you are experiencing persistent symptoms or your symptoms are worsening, you should consider seeking help.

## What is Baby Blues?

More than half of all mothers will experience 'Baby Blues' after giving birth and symptoms involve feeling very tearful and emotional. These symptoms normally start approximately two days after birth and may last a few hours or up to several days. You may also experience anxious thoughts, difficulty sleeping, loss of appetite, or irrational worries about motherhood. It is helpful for you (and your friends and family) to remember that these feelings are usually temporary and will soon pass.

No treatment is necessary for Baby Blues beyond the support of friends and family. However, if your symptoms continue beyond the first week, you may be developing postnatal depression.

## **What is postnatal depression?**

Approximately 1 in 10 mothers experience postnatal depression.

Postnatal depression is very distressing and hard to predict. Symptoms can start after the first week of giving birth or they may not start until several months later. They may also occur gradually or very suddenly.

The symptoms of postnatal depression are similar to those of antenatal depression (see page 3) and often lead to confused and guilty feelings towards your newborn baby. You may even become fearful of being left alone with your baby.

Women who experience antenatal depression are at increased risk of experiencing postnatal depression, but this is not inevitable. Once again, it is important to remember that this period of your life can be very stressful and it is normal to feel *some* of these symptoms *some* of the time. Nevertheless, you should still consider seeking help if you are experiencing persistent symptoms or your symptoms are worsening.

## **Experiencing anxiety and other mental health difficulties**

It is not uncommon for women to experience other forms of mental health difficulties during this period. These difficulties can include overwhelming feelings of anxiety, obsessive compulsive tendencies, and problems with eating.

Puerperal psychosis (also called postpartum psychosis) is a severe and rare form of mental illness which occurs in 1 in 500 mothers. Symptoms normally occur within the first week after birth and can involve extreme paranoia, hallucinations, and other bizarre behaviours. This is a medical emergency and requires immediate psychiatric support via your GP.

Women who have a personal history or a family history of psychosis or bipolar disorder have a higher risk of puerperal psychosis. If you think you may be at risk, you should meet with your GP to discuss preventative treatment.

## What can I do to help myself?

There is no guaranteed way to prevent mental illness, but there are several things you can do which will decrease your risk of developing symptoms:

- ▶ **Be kind to yourself and be realistic:** Many people experience low mood because they don't meet their own high expectations. Everyone finds this period of life difficult and you may need to lower your expectations.
- ▶ **Make time for yourself:** Get as much rest as possible (before and after your baby arrives). There will always be things to do, but don't let minor tasks stop you prioritising time for yourself.
- ▶ **Emotional support:** Don't try and cope on your own. Discuss your feelings with at least one close friend or family member.
- ▶ **Practical support:** Ask for practical support from friends and family, such as making a meal or doing the shopping.
- ▶ **Get out and have a regular routine:** Plan your day/week so you're getting out of the house on a regular basis. This could be going to the shops, seeing a friend, or walking in the park.
- ▶ **Mother and baby groups:** Antenatal and postnatal groups will give you the opportunity to meet other new parents and help remind you that you're not alone. (Contact your midwife, health visitor or nearest Children's Centre for details of local groups.)
- ▶ **Sleep/exercise/healthy eating:** You may only be able to make very small changes in these areas of your everyday life, but the impact upon your state of mind can be significant.
- ▶ **Be mindful of stresses:** If possible, carefully manage additional stresses during this period of your life. This may mean temporarily handing over a particular task or responsibility.

## How can my friends and family help?

Experiencing mental health difficulties can have a negative impact on your motivation which makes it even more difficult to seek help. This may leave you with the feeling that you are struggling all alone.

Close friends and family may notice your symptoms before you realise them yourself, so encourage them to offer you support during this period of your life. You can help them to do this by talking with them about the types of support you find most useful, eg attending appointments or groups with you, helping you look out for early signs of mental health difficulties, taking over responsibility for a daily task in the house, ensuring that you have some time to yourself on a regular basis, etc.

## What treatment and support is available?

Your GP and midwife/health visitor will regularly ask you how you are coping. Use this opportunity to ask for their advice and support. If you find that you are experiencing any mental health difficulties, contact them and arrange an appointment to discuss your symptoms. They will talk through your situation and discuss the different options that are available:

- ▶ **Increased professional visits/support:** You may be offered regular appointments with a health professional to help you monitor your symptoms and to help you develop different coping strategies.
- ▶ **Support groups and helplines:** Some organisations run helplines and local support groups where you can meet with other women experiencing similar difficulties.
- ▶ **Counselling/Therapy:** There are specific psychological therapies (such as cognitive behaviour therapy) and a variety of local counselling services which can offer you support.
- ▶ **Medication:** Depending on the nature of your difficulties, your GP may suggest taking anti-depressants or other medication. (There are national guidelines about which medication is safe to take during pregnancy and breastfeeding.)

## YOUR BABY AND YOU

In the midst of all the changes and challenges that take place during this period of your life, it is vital to remember that you are the most important person in your baby's life.

The early days and weeks after birth are an extraordinary time as you and your baby recover from the birth process and gradually develop an understanding of one another.

Even at this very young age, your baby's future emotional, cognitive and social development is being shaped by their growing sense of security with you. This sense of security will develop through simple acts of parental care, such as holding your baby close to you, speaking to your baby and responding to their babbles, and giving your baby time to look at you and get to know you as a parent.

As with any new relationship, there are times when it can be challenging and stressful. This can take more work than you had initially thought and there might be periods when you feel your relationship with your baby is not turning out the way you had expected. It is at these times when you and your baby are most in need of support from a partner, family member, friend, health professional, or a support group.

Sometimes, the best form of support is giving you and your baby the space you need to spend quality time with one another, so you can both learn to enjoy this precious period of your lives together.



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