

## Postnatal depression

After having a baby, up to 80 per cent of women may develop the 'baby blues'. This feeling passes in a day or two and is different to postnatal depression (PND). PND is a depression that comes on within 12 months of having a baby, usually during the first few weeks or months. It can range in severity from very mild and transient, to severe and lingering. For most women, it passes quickly; for others, professional help is needed. Postnatal depression is most common after the first pregnancy.

### Symptoms depend on the severity

Around one in eight mothers develop postnatal depression (PND). It can happen either a few days or weeks after the birth, with a slow or sudden onset. Some women may even experience depression **during** the pregnancy (this is called antenatal depression). The range of symptoms experienced depends on the severity of the depression, and may include:

- Low self-esteem and lack of confidence
- Feelings of inadequacy and guilt
- Negative thoughts
- Feeling that life is meaningless
- Feeling unable to cope
- Tearfulness and irritability
- Difficulty sleeping or changes in sleeping patterns
- Low sex drive
- Anxiety, panic attacks or heart palpitations
- Loss of appetite
- Difficulty concentrating or remembering things.

### Contributing factors

The exact causes of PND are still not known. Some contributing factors might include:

- **Physical changes** - even a relatively easy birth is an overwhelming experience for the female body. In addition, the sudden drop in pregnancy hormones affects brain chemicals (neurotransmitters). Broken sleep and exhaustion can also contribute to depression.
- **Emotional changes** - adapting to parenthood is daunting. The new mother has to deal with the constant demands of a baby, a different dynamic to her relationship with her partner and the loss of her own independence. Such changes would be hard at the best of times, but are even more overwhelming when a woman is still physically recovering from childbirth and coping with broken sleep.
- **Social changes** - society puts lots of demands and expectations on a new mother, which a woman may feel she needs to live up to. She may find herself less able to keep up contact with her friends and workmates. Adapting to living on one wage may also be difficult.

### Postpone any major life decisions

Postnatal depression can put an enormous strain on any relationship, even when the partner is patient, loving and supportive. It isn't unusual for a couple battling PND to think that their relationship has soured beyond repair. Generally, this is not the case, since most relationships return to normal once the depression lifts. It is a good idea to postpone any major life decisions while in the grip of PND.

### The relationship with the baby

A woman with PND tends to withdraw from everyone, including her baby. This is a symptom of the disorder and doesn't mean that she is a 'bad' mother. Some people think that bonding between the mother and child has to happen within the first few days or weeks of birth, or else it won't happen at all. This is not true. Their relationship is an ongoing process. Once the depression lifts, the mother will be able to once again feel her full range of emotions and start to enjoy her baby. In the meantime, she might need some extra help from family and friends.

## Type of help available

Support and patience from family and friends is perhaps the most crucial factor in a woman's recovery. Talking about her feelings, particularly with other women in support groups or to a professional counsellor, can be helpful. In more severe cases, anti-depressants and other medications might be used to bring about a change in mood. It's important to remember that PND is a temporary condition that will improve with time.

## Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Professional counsellor
- PANDA (Post and Ante Natal Depression Association), National Perinatal Depression Helpline Tel. 1300 726 306, Monday - Friday, 9am to 7pm AEST.
- The Royal Women's Hospital Tel. (03) 8345 2000
- Contact your local hospital, many offer support for women (and their families) who are affected by PND

## Things to remember

- Postnatal depression can develop within a few days or weeks of giving birth.
- The condition can range from a mild feeling of sadness to a paralysing depression.
- The exact causes of postnatal depression are unknown; however, the enormous physical, emotional and social changes involved in becoming a parent seem to play a significant role
- The Maternal and Child Health Line is available 24 hours a day Tel. 132 229.

**This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:**

Royal Women's Hospital

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