
Pregnancy and your mental health

Summary

- Pregnancy and being a new parent is a time of huge change.
 - If you have been feeling sad, down, worried or anxious for more than two weeks, it's a good idea to talk to someone about how you're feeling.
 - The combination of physical, social and emotional changes in pregnancy may, for some, lead to mental health issues such as anxiety and depression.
 - Mental health issues are treatable and with the right support most people will recover.
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Finding out you are pregnant can be a very exciting time. But it can also make you feel uncomfortable, unwell and worried, and make you wonder how you are going to cope. And it doesn't stop when the baby arrives. Some mums find it easy to adjust to life with a new baby, but others don't.

Pregnancy and new parenthood are full of emotions – some good and some not so good. Just remember that there are lots of places to find help.

Pregnancy, changes and mental health

Pregnancy changes your body in all sorts of ways. Morning sickness, backache, headache, leg cramps, varicose veins, itchiness, constipation, haemorrhoids, indigestion and vaginal discharge are some of the realities of pregnancy. And not surprisingly, they can affect how you feel about being pregnant.

For some people, there's the worry of what lies ahead. Maybe you didn't plan your pregnancy. Maybe you're worried about how a new baby will affect your relationship. Or maybe you're concerned about childbirth.

These are all common worries and you may feel some or all of these things during your pregnancy. But if these feelings of sadness, worry or anxiety start to affect your life, it may be something more serious, like perinatal depression or anxiety. According to **PANDA** (Perinatal Anxiety and Depression Australia), up to one in ten women experience depression during their pregnancy.

If you have a pre-existing or a past mental health condition, and you are pregnant, the good news is that with support and treatment, you are likely to have a healthy pregnancy and baby. The most important thing is to talk about it – tell the health provider managing your pregnancy about your mental health condition. And tell your mental health care provider that you're pregnant. Together, they can help you manage your pregnancy and your mental health.

Mental health after giving birth

Having a baby is a very emotional time. You may be sore after the birth, not getting enough sleep, overwhelmed by your new baby and feeling worried about being a good mum. Being a mum is hard work! You might have unrealistic expectations of new motherhood. And you might find it hard not having much time to yourself.

You may have heard about the **baby blues**. Up to 80 per cent of women feel teary, irritable, overly sensitive, moody or overwhelmed after giving birth (often between day three and day 10 after birth).

Often, changes in hormone levels are to blame and these feelings usually pass within a few days. Usually you don't need any treatment, just support and understanding. But if these symptoms continue beyond the early days, it may be a sign of something more serious, like depression or anxiety.

Postnatal depression can occur between one month and up to one year after a woman gives birth to a baby. Postnatal depression is a common mental health condition, affecting up to one in seven women giving birth in Australia.

It's not just new mums or mums-to-be who can feel anxious and apprehensive. Welcoming a new member of the

family can also be a complicated time for **fathers and partners**, who may worry about being a good partner and parent, how a baby will affect their lifestyle, or how they will deal with the added responsibilities.

Symptoms of perinatal depression and anxiety

If you're worried about how you or your partner are feeling, here are some signs and symptoms to look out for:

- panic attacks – a racing heart, palpitations, shortness of breath, shaking or feeling physically 'detached' from your surroundings
- persistent, generalised worry, often focused on health concerns
- obsessive or compulsive behaviour
- abrupt mood swings
- feeling sad, down or crying for no obvious reason
- having little or no interest in things that bring joy (like time with friends, exercise, eating or being with your partner)
- being nervous or on edge
- feeling tired all the time
- not being able to sleep
- losing interest in sex or intimacy
- fear of being alone with your baby
- intrusive thoughts of harming yourself or your baby
- brain fog, or finding it difficult to focus, concentrate or remember things
- engaging in risk taking behaviour (such as drug use).

Men may be more likely to experience symptoms such as frustration or irritability, increased anger and conflict with others, or increased alcohol and drug use.

If these symptoms last for more than two weeks, it's time to get some help. The sooner you see someone, the quicker you'll start to feel better.

Where to get help for your mental health during and after pregnancy

If you feel anxious or overwhelmed, or if you think you need some help, the good news is there are lots of people you can talk to. Your GP, obstetrician, midwife or **Maternal and Child Health Nurse** can advise you about treatments, support and services that can help.

There are also specialised services you can contact, like **PANDA** (Perinatal Anxiety and Depression Australia) and **beyondblue**. These organisations have fact sheets and tip sheets for new mums and new dads, as well as contact numbers if you'd like to speak with someone.

Sometimes it's a relief just to tell someone how you're feeling and have them tell you it's okay. They may suggest some strategies to help you manage your feelings and worries. Your GP could refer you to a psychologist, or they may suggest medication for a while. Some medications are safe to use during pregnancy and breastfeeding.

Don't forget to look after yourself during pregnancy

Good health and wellbeing may help prevent and reduce mild depression and anxiety.

- **Eat well.**
- Stop drinking **alcohol**.
- **Stop smoking.** Your GP or midwife can help you find 'stop smoking' services.
- Find some time each week to do something that you enjoy. This improves your mood and helps you relax.
- Let family and friends help you with housework and shopping. Say yes to offers of help.
- **Exercise.** Even a gentle walk in the fresh air every day or two will make a difference.
- Get regular sleep.

Above all, be kind to yourself. The most important thing you can do is look after yourself and your baby.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your obstetrician
- Midwife
- Maternal and child health nurse
- **PANDA** (Perinatal Anxiety and Depression Australia) Tel. **1300 726 306**
- **beyondblue** Tel. **1300 22 4636**
- **Lifeline** Tel. **13 11 14**

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