

Postpartum Depression

Having a baby is a joyous time for most women. After childbirth, though, many mothers feel sad, afraid, angry or anxious. Postpartum depression (PPD) is a condition that describes a range of physical and emotional changes that many mothers can have after having a baby.

There are three types of PPD:

- *Baby Blues* — The *baby blues* happen in many women in the days right after childbirth. It's estimated that 70 to 80 percent of all new mothers experience the baby blues. A new mother can have sudden mood swings, such as feeling very happy and then feeling very sad. She may cry for no reason and can feel impatient, irritable, restless, anxious, lonely and sad. The baby blues may last only a few hours or as long as 1-2 weeks after delivery. The baby blues do not always require treatment from a health care provider.
- *Postpartum Depression* — A more severe form of the blues called *postpartum depression* (PPD) occurs in approximately 10% of childbearing women. A woman can have feelings similar to the baby blues – sadness, despair, anxiety, and irritability – but she feels them much more strongly than she would with the baby blues. PPD often keeps a woman from doing the things she needs to do every day. When a woman's ability to function is affected, this is a sure sign that she needs to see her health care provider right away. If a woman does not get treatment for PPD, symptoms can get worse and last as long as 1 year. While PPD is a serious condition, it can be treated with medication and counseling.
- *Postpartum Psychosis* — An uncommon but severe form of depression, affecting only 1 in 1,000 new mothers, is *postpartum psychosis*. This relatively rare disorder requires urgent medical attention. This illness can happen quickly, often within the first 3 months after childbirth. Women can lose touch with reality, often having auditory hallucinations (hearing things that aren't actually happening, like a person talking) and delusions (seeing things differently than what they are). Visual hallucinations (seeing things that aren't there) are less common. Other symptoms include insomnia (not being able to sleep), feeling agitated (unsettled) and angry, and strange feelings and behaviors. Women who have postpartum psychosis need treatment right away and almost always need medication. Sometimes women are put into the hospital because they are at risk of hurting themselves or others.

What causes postpartum depression?

No single cause for these forms of postpartum depression has been identified. A woman's body experiences enormous changes through the course of labor and delivery. The transition in hormone levels from pregnancy to post-delivery is drastic. A woman's body also undergoes changes in her blood volume, blood pressure, immune system and metabolism.

How is postpartum depression treated?

It's important to know that PPD is treatable and that it will go away. The type of treatment will depend on how severe the PPD is. PPD can be treated with medication such as antidepressants, and psychotherapy. Women with PPD are often advised to attend a support group to talk with other women who are going through the same thing. If a woman is breastfeeding, she needs to talk with her health care provider about taking any medication. Some of these drugs affect breast milk and should not be used.

What can I do to take care of myself if I get postpartum depression?

The good news is that if you have PPD, there are things you can do to take care of yourself.

- Get good rest. Always try to nap when the baby naps.
- Stop putting pressure on yourself to do everything. Do as much as you can and leave the rest! Ask for help with household chores and nighttime feedings.
- Talk to your husband, partner, family and friends about how you're feeling.
- Do not spend a lot of time alone. Get dressed and leave the house – run an errand or take a walk.
- Spend time alone with your husband or partner.
- Talk to your health care provider about medical treatment.
- Talk with other mothers, so you can learn from their experiences.
- Join a support group for women with PPD. Call a local hotline or look in your telephone book for information and services.

For more information

You can find out more about postpartum depression by contacting the National Women's Health Information Center (NWHIC) at (800) 994-9662 or the following organizations:

Mental Health Association in Milwaukee County
(414) 276-3122 or Internet: <http://www.mhamilw.org>

National Women's Health Information Center (NWHIC)
(800) 994-9662 or Internet: <http://www.4woman.gov/>

National Mental Health Association
(800) 969-6642 or Internet: <http://www.nmha.org>

National Institute of Mental Health
(301) 496-9576 or Internet: <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/>

Depression After Delivery, Inc.
(800) 944-4773 or Internet: <http://www.depressionafterdelivery.com/>

Postpartum Education for Parents
(805) 564-3888 or Internet: <http://www.sbpep.org>.

American Psychological Association
(800) 374-2721 or Internet: <http://www.apa.org>

American College of Obstetrics and Gynecologists (ACOG)
(800) 762-2264 or Internet: <http://acog.com>.

Sources:

National Women's Health Information Center
American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists
National Mental Health Association