



What is Postpartum Depression?

The birth of a child creates many changes in a woman's life. If the child is her first, her relationship with her husband will change from being a romantic bond to include a working partnership focused on housework and childcare. If she already has children, her relationships with them will change as the family includes the new member. A new mother may give up paid work or she may no longer have time for her own activities about which she can feel sad and isolated. Some women are unprepared for these losses and for the amount and type of work involved in caring for an infant. They may feel resentful of the baby and ashamed that they are not living up to the image of the perfect mother - feelings which can sometimes spiral into postpartum depression (PPD). 10% to 15% of new mothers experience clinically significant PPD.

Symptoms of Postpartum Depression

- Sadness and/or anger
- Cannot think clearly
- Lack of interest or pleasure in activities
- Guilt, especially about the baby
- Increased or decreased appetite
- Feels inadequate, especially as a mother
- Increased or decreased sleep
- Suicidal thoughts
- Extreme fatigue

What causes Postpartum Depression?

The term is misleading because it implies 2 things that are not true. First, it implies that the depression is caused by childbirth. Although some professionals blame PPD on hormones, there is little scientific evidence to support this view. A minority of women develops PPD because of thyroid problems. Further, PPD does not necessarily reflect a mother's negative feelings about her baby. Having a baby may reveal problems in her life, such as marital difficulties, that were not obvious before the birth. For 40% of women, PPD starts during pregnancy.

Second, the term implies that there is something different about PPD that distinguishes it from depression that occurs at other times in a person's life. Research shows that the symptoms of PPD are common to both. In addition, women who are at risk for PPD are at risk for depression at other times in their lives. The majority of women with PPD become depressed because of psychological and social risk factors as listed in the following table.

Risk Factors for Postpartum Depression

- Depressed or anxious during pregnancy
- Previous history of depression or emotional problems
- Difficulties with infant's care or health
- Baby is "difficult"
- Life stress during pregnancy
- Not married to baby's father
- Lack of support from husband and/or family
- Financial problems or low levels of education
- Unhappily married

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What is the Impact of Postpartum Depression?

PPD can have a dramatic impact on the parents and the baby. Husbands often feel burdened by their wives' depression and unable to help, which can have a negative effect on the marriage for years afterward. The babies of mothers with PPD are more irritable and difficult to soothe, and they tend not to develop as well. Women with PPD can be impatient, distant or insensitive with their babies, which may affect the mother-child bond and have consequences for their future relationship. When older, these children can be at risk for emotional and behavioural problems.

How can Psychologists Help?

Most women experiencing PPD are too ashamed of their feelings to seek help. When they do seek help from a health care professional, they may be told that their feelings are normal or that they will get better on their own. Like any other depression, PPD can be treated psychologically.

Research shows that Interpersonal therapy (IPT) is effective. IPT helps women to make changes within important relationships so that they get the emotional support, help, and understanding they need.

Cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) helps women to identify and change those beliefs and expectations that make them feel depressed. For instance, many women with PPD have overly high expectations of themselves as mothers.

Some women may find postpartum support groups to be helpful. Although the evidence for the effectiveness of these groups is mixed, groups may help women to overcome feelings of guilt and isolation. Research shows that when a woman has PPD, often her husband is depressed and anxious as well.