

Sad feelings after childbirth – a ‘hidden’ problem

Although having a baby is usually a happy event, it’s also true that some women become depressed or anxious after the birth of a child. This problem sometimes called postnatal depression (PND), affects about 15 -20 per cent of mothers. Yet it’s often a ‘hidden’ problem because some women find it hard to talk about. Women who feel sad or anxious are often afraid to tell anyone, in case other people think they are a ‘bad’ mother or that they can’t cope. This can make these women feel even more isolated.

But confidential help is available for women with Postnatal Depression and anxiety. Planning ahead, having a partner who is supportive, and knowing who can help, reduces the risk of these problems.

What are the symptoms of PND?

PND can happen at any time during the first year after the birth of a baby. It’s normal for a woman to feel emotional and anxious just after a baby is born. But if this lasts for more than two weeks, or if she feels overwhelmed by symptoms like those listed below, it’s important to get help.

- Feeling ‘down’; loss of interest or enjoyment in things
- Problems with appetite
- Difficulty getting back to sleep at night after feeding the baby
- Feeling exhausted even months after the birth;
- Crying, feeling irritable, anxious or confused; feeling inadequate
- Having panic attacks; not wanting to be left alone
- Loss of interest in sex, even when the baby is a few months old
- Not wanting to go out or see people

What causes PND?

New babies are rewarding – but they may create many stresses too. Motherhood is a new role with hard work, responsibility and little sleep – it may take time to adjust. Parenthood can be particularly difficult for single parents, or for couples with no family close by to help. Sometimes people say ‘my mother brought up six children – how come a woman with only one or two children has problems?’ But times change and more couples are bringing up children without the support of relatives, and there may be more financial pressure forcing both parents to work. Language difficulties and past experiences with torture or trauma can also add to the stress of new motherhood.

In some cultures, the older generation may believe PND is caused by not following traditional practices during pregnancy and after childbirth – but research shows this isn’t a cause. Having PND doesn’t mean a woman is not a good mother. Nor is it a punishment from God.

What can you do to lower the risk of getting PND?

By planning ahead while you're still pregnant (especially if you have had PND with a previous pregnancy).

- Plan to avoid other big changes around the time of the birth (eg moving house, home renovations, changing jobs)
- Prepare for the birth by attending antenatal classes (even if you've already had a baby)
- Prepare your partner – talk about the extra workload which the new baby will involve. Ask him to plan as much time off work as possible after the birth.
- Try to arrange support from family or friends after the birth, especially if you have other children. Or ask your midwife or hospital social worker about support services in your area.
- If you have had PND after a previous pregnancy, tell your GP and midwife

If you think you have PND, who can help?

- Your GP or midwife.
- Local Early Childhood Health Centre
- Tresillian Family Care Service 24 hour phone service (02) 9787 5255 or 1800 637 357 (toll free)
- Karitane Mothercraft Society 24 hour phone service (02) 9794 1852 or 1800 677 961 (toll free)

If you need help making phone calls in English, ring the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) on 131 450.

You can find more health information in your language on the Multicultural Communication website at <<http://mhcs.health.nsw.gov.au>>