

Perinatal mood disorders

While many women experience mild mood changes during or after the birth of a child, 15 to 20 percent experience more significant symptoms of depression or anxiety.

Symptoms of these perinatal mood and anxiety disorders can appear any time during pregnancy and the first 12 months after childbirth, affecting women of every culture, age, income level and race. Fortunately, effective treatment is available.

Although the term postpartum depression is most often used, there are actually more forms of depression and anxiety associated with pregnancy that women may experience, including:

- **Baby blues:** This will be experienced by 70 to 80 percent of new mothers. The baby blues typically begin several days after birth and may last for several weeks. Symptoms include fatigue, inability to sleep, feelings of sadness, feeling overwhelmed, inability to cope, feelings of loneliness, and feeling nervous or anxious. For many women, the baby blues feel like an “emotional roller coaster,” alternating between mild depression and happier feelings.
- **Pregnancy or postpartum depression:** A woman with depression associated with pregnancy might experience anger, sadness, irritability, guilt, lack of interest in the baby, changes in eating and sleeping habits, trouble concentrating, thoughts of hopelessness and sometimes even thoughts of harming the baby or herself.
- **Pregnancy or postpartum anxiety:** A woman with anxiety associated with pregnancy may experience extreme worries and fears, often over the health and safety of the baby. Some women have panic attacks and might feel shortness of breath, chest pain, dizziness, a feeling of losing control, and numbness and tingling.
- **Pregnancy or postpartum obsessive-compulsive disorder:** Women with this disorder can have repetitive, upsetting and unwanted thoughts or mental images (obsessions), and sometimes need to do certain things over and over (compulsions) to reduce the anxiety caused by those thoughts. These moms find these thoughts very scary and unusual and are unlikely to ever act on them.
- **Postpartum post-traumatic stress disorder:** This often is caused by a traumatic or frightening childbirth, and symptoms may include flashbacks of the trauma with feelings of anxiety and the need to avoid things related to that event.
- **Postpartum psychosis:** Sufferers sometimes see and hear voices or images — hallucinations — that others can’t. These women may believe things that aren’t true and distrust those around them. They also may have periods of confusion and memory loss, and seem manic. This is a severe condition, and it’s important to seek help immediately.

What can you do?

Start by getting support from your significant other, family and friends. Other ideas:

- Ask someone to care for the baby while you sleep.
- Exercise or walk each day.
- Eat balanced, nutritious meals each day.
- Talk about how you feel and your experiences.
- Give yourself permission to do less and let others help you.
- If your symptoms don't get better, or they start to interfere with your daily life, please call your obstetrician or primary care doctor right away.

Additional resources

- Postpartum Support International: Trained volunteers are available to provide support and resources. Call 888-434-MOMS (6667) or visit www.postpartum.net.
- Arizona Postpartum Wellness Coalition (www.postpartum.net/locations/arizona).