

## Postpartum Depression

“Postpartum” means the time after childbirth. Postpartum depression is a serious mental illness that involves the brain and affects your behavior and physical health. If you feel empty, emotionless, or sad all or most of the time for longer than two weeks during or after pregnancy, or if you feel like you don't love or care for your baby, you might have postpartum depression. Treatment for depression, such as therapy or medicine, works and will help you and your baby be as healthy as possible in the future.

### **Q: What causes postpartum depression?**

**A:** Hormonal changes may trigger symptoms of postpartum depression. When you are pregnant, levels of the female hormones estrogen (ESS-truh-jen) and progesterone (proh-JESS-tur-ohn) are the highest they'll ever be. In the first 24 hours after childbirth, hormone levels quickly drop back to normal, pre-pregnancy levels. Researchers think this sudden change in hormone levels may lead to depression.

Levels of thyroid hormones may also drop after giving birth. Low levels of thyroid hormones can cause symptoms of depression.

Other feelings may contribute to postpartum depression, including feeling tired, overwhelmed, and stressed. These feelings are common among new mothers.

### **Q: How do I know if I have postpartum depression?**

**A:** Any woman can become depressed during pregnancy or after having a baby. It doesn't mean you are a bad mom. But if you have any of the following symptoms for more than two weeks, call your doctor, nurse, or midwife:

- Feeling restless or moody
- Feeling sad, hopeless, and overwhelmed
- Crying a lot
- Having thoughts about hurting the baby or yourself
- Not having any interest in the baby, not feeling connected to the baby, or feeling like your baby is someone else's baby
- Having no energy or motivation
- Eating or sleeping too little or too much
- Having trouble focusing or making decisions
- Having memory problems
- Feeling worthless and guilty, and like a bad mother
- Losing interest or pleasure in activities you used to enjoy
- Withdrawing from friends and family

### **Q: What is the difference between “baby blues” and postpartum depression?**

**A:** Most women get the “baby blues,” or feel sad or empty, within a few days of giving birth. If you have the baby blues, you may have mood swings, feel sad or overwhelmed, have crying spells, lose your appetite, or have trouble sleeping. The baby blues usually go away in three to five days after they start. The symptoms of postpartum depression last longer and are more severe. Postpartum depression usually begins within the first month after childbirth, but it can begin during pregnancy or for up to a year after birth.

**Q: How is postpartum depression treated?**

**A:** Your depression can affect your baby. Getting treatment is important for you and your baby. The common types of treatment for postpartum depression are:

- **Talk therapy.** This involves talking to a therapist, psychologist, or social worker to learn strategies to change how depression makes you think, feel, and act.
- **Medicine.** Your doctor or nurse can prescribe an antidepressant medicine. These medicines can help relieve symptoms of depression, and some can be taken while you're breastfeeding.
- **Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT).** This can be used in extreme cases to treat postpartum depression.

These treatments can be used alone or together. Taking medicines for depression or going to therapy does not make you a bad mother or a failure. Getting help is a sign of strength. Talk with your doctor or nurse about the benefits and risks of taking medicine to treat depression when you are pregnant or breastfeeding.

**Q: What can I do at home to feel better while seeing a doctor for postpartum depression?**

**A:** Here are some other ways to begin feeling better or getting more rest, in addition to talking to a health care professional:

- Rest as much as you can. Sleep when the baby is sleeping.
- Don't try to do too much or to do everything by yourself. Ask your partner, family, and friends for help.
- Make time to go out, visit friends, or spend time alone with your partner.
- Talk about your feelings with your partner, supportive family members, and friends.
- Talk with other mothers so that you can learn from their experiences.
- Join a support group. Ask your doctor or nurse about groups in your area.
- Don't make any major life changes right after giving birth. More major life changes in addition to a new baby can cause unneeded stress.

**For more information...**

For more information about postpartum depression, call the OWH Helpline at 1-800-994-9662 or contact the following organizations:

**National Institute of Mental Health, NIH, HHS**  
1-866-615-6464 • [www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov)

**National Alliance on Mental Illness**  
1-800-950-6264 • [www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org)

**Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, NIH, HHS**  
1-800-370-2943 • [www.nichd.nih.gov](http://www.nichd.nih.gov)

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