



Northumbria Healthcare
NHS Foundation Trust

Emotional changes in pregnancy and after childbirth

Issued by Obstetrics and Gynaecology

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How can pregnancy affect my mental health?

Women can experience problems with their mental health during pregnancy, just like at other times. Some women may already have a mental illness when they get pregnant, or worry about problems that they have had in the past.

This leaflet is designed to raise awareness of peri-natal mental illness and mental health issues which can arise before or after having a baby. In addition, it is hoped that the leaflet will reduce the stigma often associated with peri-natal anxiety and depression.

What to expect

There are lots of changes when you are expecting a baby. These include:

- Changes in your hormones and body shape.
- The arrival of a new person in your life.
- Changes in your personal routines as you adjust to having a new baby around.
- Changes for your other children (if you have them) as their lives will alter too.
- Relationship changes if you have a partner – you change from being just a couple to being parents too.
- If you are on your own there may be the additional responsibility of managing the baby yourself.

This leaflet tries to answer some commonly asked questions about emotional adjustment through pregnancy and after the birth of a baby.

So now I am pregnant, how might I feel?

After the first few months, whilst you may feel sick and tired, many women feel physically and emotionally well and excited about having a new baby on the way. However, about 10-15% of women feel anxious and/or depressed at this time. Sometimes they worry about practical things, for example:

- Pain relief in childbirth.
- The results of various routine tests that are offered to expectant mothers.
- Having enough money to support a child.
- How to fit in looking after a baby and going back to work.
- Of course, this worry is natural but sometimes some additional support can be helpful.

Other worries can be about relationships, for example:

- Concern that a baby was not planned.
- Whether you will bond with the new baby.
- Worry about whether you will be a good parent.
- Whether the new baby will affect your relationship with your partner or family relationships.
- Memories of your own childhood. If you or your partner were not always happy as children, a new baby can remind you of these times.

What about after my baby is born – what might I feel like?

Nearly all mothers experience a short period of 'baby blues' in the first week after their baby is born (this is probably due to the change in hormone levels). After this, many mothers feel fine, but a significant proportion of new mothers experience, for example:

- Tearfulness, frustration and irritability.
- Feeling tired or not wanting to do anything.
- Trouble sleeping.
- Changes in appetite.
- Lack of interest in the new baby.
- Difficulty concentrating.
- Not wanting to see friends or family.
- Feeling lonely, panicky or overwhelmed.
- Feeling unable to cope and guilty.
- Loss of sex drive.

Some of these feelings arise out of the busy time when looking after a new, dependent baby. Feeling a variety of emotions from happy and settled to tearful and overwhelmed is normal when you have had a baby, particularly during the first six weeks or so. Each person will react slightly differently and there is no right or wrong way to feel. If any doubt, talk to someone and ask for help.

Do new fathers sometimes get depressed too?

Yes they can, and sometimes feel that it is inappropriate for them to talk about these feelings. Health visitors and GPs are there for fathers too.

Do these feelings develop into more serious post-natal depression?

Most people find that these feelings are relieved by talking to another person they can trust. About 10-15% find that the feelings described above are more intense and difficult to manage. A woman experiencing such post-natal depression may feel completely unable to cope at times. It is really important that you do not suffer in silence and speak to your health visitor or GP.

So is post-natal depression treatable?

Yes. Some mothers and fathers find it helpful to see a professionally trained counsellor or psychologist. Other people find a short course of antidepressant medication is the best help for them. Modern antidepressant medication is not addictive. If you are breast feeding your baby your GP can prescribe medication which does not get into breast milk.

Do some women feel like harming themselves or their babies?

About 1 woman in 1,000 has a more serious condition which is called puerperal or partum psychosis. This can start quite suddenly during the first two weeks after the birth. Women who have developed this condition can become extremely agitated and confused and often have unusual and upsetting thoughts about themselves or their babies. It is very important to tell your midwife, health visitor or GP or hospital doctor if you feel like this so you can be helped as soon as possible. It is also important to let the health professionals know if you have a relative who has experienced a serious breakdown after pregnancy or at any other time.

If I am feeling a bit depressed or anxious during my pregnancy or afterwards, what can I do to help myself?

There are some things you can do that may help you cope with how you are feeling:

- Talk about your worries with your partner, family or friends.
- Talk to your midwife, health visitor or GP about anything that concerns you.
- Accept all the help that is offered to you and ask for help if you need it. If friends or family can't help, then discuss lack of support with your midwife or health visitor.
- Get as much rest as possible – this may seem easier said than done with a new baby! However, even short periods of time when your baby is sleeping or when someone else can look after your baby can help.
- Take some gentle exercise (ask your midwife for advice).
- Remember to eat as healthily as possible.
- Don't diet or go too long without food – low blood sugar can make you feel worse.
- Don't try to do everything at once – make a list of things to do and set realistic goals for yourself.
- When your baby becomes a bit more independent try to do something with a friend or partner. This will remind you that you are a person as well as a parent.

If you have any questions or concerns about emotional changes in pregnancy or after having your baby speak to your midwife, health visitor, GP or hospital doctor.

They may be able to help you think through some of your worries or find you some help if you need it.

Sources of information

Associations & websites

National Childbirth Trust: 0300 330 0700 www.nct.org.uk

Association for Postnatal Illnesses: 0207 3860 868 www.apni.org

PANDAS (Pre & post natal advice & support) 0843 28 98 401
www.pandasfoundation.org.uk

Useful contact numbers

Samaritans: 116 123

The Northumbria Specialist Emergency Care Hospital

Northumbria Way

Cramlington

NE23 6NZ

Pregnancy assessment unit: 0191 607 2815

Birth centre: 0191 607 2318

Ward 16: 0191 607 2016

Berwick Midwifery Led Unit

High Green

Berwick-upon-Tweed

TD15 1LT

01289 356 622

Hexham Midwifery Led Unit

Corbridge Road

Hexham

NE46 1QJ

01434 655 352

Hillcrest Midwifery Led Unit

Infirmery Drive

Alnwick

NE66 2NS

01665 626 732

Alternative Formats

If you would like a copy of this information in large print, another language, audio tape or other format please call the Contact Centre on 03 44 811 8118.

Other sources of information

NHS 111

NHS Choices

www.nhs.uk/pages/homepage.aspx

NICE (National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence)

www.nice.org.uk

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

Freephone: 0800 032 0202

Text: 07815 500015

Email: northoftynepals@nhct.nhs.uk

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General Enquiries 03 44 811 8111

www.northumbria.nhs.uk

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