

Maternal Depression

All families experience a period of adjustment when a baby is born. While pregnancy and childbirth are usually times of great joy and triumph, they are often accompanied by changes and demands that may feel overwhelming and challenging.

Baby Blues

For a very brief period following the birth of a child, it is common for a new mother to experience mood swings, restlessness, and weepiness. These symptoms, which are usually short-lived, are referred to as the "baby blues." Even the most competent mother may experience them. For most women, the baby blues generally clear up within a few days or weeks. Strategies for helping a mother manage the baby blues include talking to a friend or supportive family member or reading about other moms who have had the baby blues.

Maternal Depression

Sometimes the depression is more serious and longer-lasting. This type of depression is called "postpartum depression." It usually begins within the first six months after childbirth and may last a year or longer if left untreated. Postpartum depression affects a woman's thinking, moods, sleep patterns, and physical health. It may also affect her feelings toward herself, her baby, and her family. Because a mom with postpartum depression may struggle to develop a loving attitude toward her baby, untreated depression can affect her child's healthy development (see box).

Some women believe they can overcome postpartum depression on their own, and some are told by others they will be fine in a couple weeks. If the symptoms do not lessen after a few weeks or if a woman is not able to manage the depression, immediate attention by a health care provider is necessary. In rare instances, severe signs and symptoms may indicate postpartum psychosis, which requires immediate attention and treatment (see box).

Seeking Help

If you believe that you or someone you know has postpartum depression, professional diagnosis and treatment is critical. A woman can call her doctor or her baby's doctor for help. Postpartum support groups and specialty clinics are also available in some areas. Overall, it is important to understand that depression may not be something a woman can "get over" on her own, nor is it a sign of being a bad parent. Depression is manageable and treatable—effective treatment is available.

Self Care

Lack of sleep and social isolation can affect how a new mom feels. Accepting help, taking naps, and keeping up with favorite activities can help.

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Symptoms of Maternal Depression

- Loses interest in caring for herself
- Sense of inadequacy, unworthiness, guilt, or failure
- Sadness
- Feeling helpless/hopeless
- Difficulty concentrating; loss of memory
- Thoughts of death, dying, or suicide
- Feeling trapped without options to change
- Overwhelming worries; frustration; anger; rage
- Wishing someone else would care for the baby or that the baby hadn't come
- Withdrawal from family, friends, and previous activities

Symptoms of Postpartum Psychosis

- Mental confusion and disorientation
- Hallucinations; delusions; paranoia
- Unusual or unrelenting thoughts and fears
- Extreme agitation and anger
- Thoughts of hurting or killing one's self or the baby

