



Understanding your mental health and emotional wellbeing during pregnancy and after the birth of your baby (mothers)

Having a baby is a huge life event and a time of change. It is normal to feel many different emotions during the transition to parenthood, for example, over half of all new mothers will experience what is known as the “baby blues”. Symptoms of the baby blues include feeling tearful, irritable, and overwhelmed at times and can last for about 10 days after having a baby.

If you continue to experience these feelings beyond this, speak to your health visitor, midwife or GP, it is possible that you are experiencing what is known as a perinatal mental illness. While depression and anxiety disorders are the most common perinatal mental illnesses, other conditions exist including eating disorders, birth trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder, tokophobia (fear of pregnancy and childbirth), psychosis, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. Perinatal mental health problems can affect mothers and fathers/partners from all cultural backgrounds. You can discuss how you are feeling with your health professional and they can offer you support.

Like many people, you may have experienced mental health difficulties prior to having a baby. It is important that you feel comfortable to speak to a relative or health professional if you have any concerns about your mental health or you feel your mental health is deteriorating.

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For additional Parent Tips see www.ihv.org.uk

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- Depression and anxiety can occur in pregnancy and during the postnatal period, and latest research shows that they affect 10-15 in every 100 women and at least 10 in every 100 men.
- If you are experiencing depression you may feel a constant feeling of sadness and low mood, loss of interest in the world around you and you may no longer enjoy the things that used to give you pleasure. You may also experience feelings of agitation, guilt, self-blame and difficulties in relating to your baby.
- If you are experiencing anxiety (with or without depression), you may have excessive fear or worry, feel nervous or on edge, your sleep may be disturbed, and you may want to avoid certain situations.
- Other relatively common mental health conditions such as Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) can occur during pregnancy or after having a baby, this is known as Perinatal OCD and can affect 2-3 in every 100 women.
- Many pregnant women and new mothers have a normal increase in obsessive and compulsive symptoms in relation to avoiding risks in pregnancy and looking after the wellbeing of their child. You may worry if you have normal, but unexpected, thoughts about your baby being harmed. For some mothers, these normal worries can trigger symptoms of OCD. These symptoms can start to interfere with daily life and bother you for an hour or more a day. Unwanted thoughts may relate to fear of dirt or germs, a thought of harming your baby or needing everything to be perfect. You may spend time carrying out rituals or compulsive behaviours to lessen your thoughts and anxiety. This may involve cleaning rituals, excessive checking, repeatedly seeking reassurance from others or avoiding situations.
- A small proportion of women may experience Postpartum Psychosis after giving birth (most often in the first two weeks, with symptoms beginning in the first few days of having a baby). It is a severe mental illness affecting 1 in every 1000 women.
- Most women with Postpartum Psychosis become ill very quickly and will require immediate treatment. Effective treatments are available and are usually provided by a specialist perinatal mental health team in a hospital known as a mother and baby unit. Symptoms include feeling confused or disorientated, excited, elated, high, overactive, very energetic, talking a lot, being unable to go to sleep, anxious, paranoid or suspicious, and as the illness progresses hearing voices or seeing unusual phenomena and having unusual beliefs that could not be true. It is important that help is sought urgently if postpartum psychosis is suspected.
- Perinatal mental health problems can make it difficult for you to relate to your baby and respond to their sleep patterns, feeding and emotional needs.
- In addition, it can make relationships challenging between you and your partner. Your partner may not know how best to support you. They can also speak to your health visitor or GP for advice.
- It can be lonely, distressing and frightening, but there is a lot of support and treatment available. The good news is most perinatal mental health problems are temporary, they respond well to treatment and have an excellent recovery rate.
- It is important to seek help if you think you are struggling with your mental health as it is unlikely to get better without support, and it could impact on the care of your baby.
- Contact your health visitor, midwife or GP. They have experience in assessing and supporting parents with perinatal mental health problems. They will be able to carry out a full assessment by asking you a number of questions and may ask you to complete a questionnaire. This will enable them to offer you the best support.
- Help is available in a range of different forms including self-help advice, talking support and psychological therapies, such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and medication. For severe mental health problems your health visitor, midwife or GP can refer you to a specialist community perinatal mental health team.

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- There are also a number of things that you can do to improve your emotional wellbeing and mental health following birth, such as:
 - Get as much rest, relaxation and regular sleep as possible.
 - Try to stop drinking alcohol altogether (you can ask your health visitor, midwife or GP for advice and support with this).
 - Stop smoking - It's a common belief that smoking helps you relax. But smoking actually increases anxiety and tension (ask your health visitor, midwife or GP about stop smoking services)
 - Eat a healthy, balanced diet.
 - Take regular, gentle exercise.
 - Do not try to do everything at once. Make a list of things to do and set realistic goals.
 - Make a wellbeing plan, helping you to think about the support you may need:
 - » Tommy's Wellbeing Plan: <https://bit.ly/2WsJtll>
 - » Meditation or Mindfulness - either through a class or an app such as Headspace App: <https://bit.ly/2yhUcgG>
- Talk about your worries with your partner, close family and friends.
- Contact local support groups or national helplines for advice and support:
 - » NHS Choices: <https://bit.ly/3aWfi1e>
 - » The Institute of Health Visiting: <https://bit.ly/3c6f8FZ>
 - » MIND: <https://bit.ly/35rQj4G>
 - » Channel Mum: <https://bit.ly/2SzGb4O>
- Do not try to be "Super parent". Avoid extra challenges either during pregnancy or in the first year after your baby is born. A new baby is enough of a challenge for most people.
- Do not be afraid to ask for help.
- **Further advice can be found in iHV Parent Tips "Coping with a traumatic birth" available here: <https://bit.ly/35DlyIV>**

"I didn't know there was specialist support available for my mental health after I had my baby until I told my health visitor how I was feeling. I am so glad I did."



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