

Preventing Postpartum Depression & Anxiety

Having a new baby is a special and challenging time in life. The physical exhaustion of pregnancy, childbirth and caring for a baby are hard enough without dealing with depression or anxiety. Those who work with pregnant women can help to prevent the development of a perinatal mood or anxiety disorder by screening women to identify those who are at risk and properly referring them to the care they need to make a plan for preventing perinatal mental health problems.

Risk Factors that Can be Identified During Pregnancy

- 1) **Family History of Mental Health Concerns:** Do you have any close family members (parents, grandparents, siblings, aunts/uncles) who suffer from mental health concerns?
- 2) **Mother's own Mental Health History:** Have you had periods of mental health problems in the past?
- 3) **Mother's Sensitivity to Hormonal Fluctuations:** Do you suffer from emotional ups and downs (irritability, sadness, anxiety) as part of your monthly cycle? Have you been diagnosed with PMDD? *It's important to note that feeling great during pregnancy does not mean that a mother is at low risk. A woman who is sensitive to hormonal changes may feel very good during pregnancy but very anxious or sad when hormones shift just before birth.*
- 4) **Mother's Personality:** Has anyone ever told you that you're a perfectionist? Do you fear losing control? Are you self-critical? Do you lack self-confidence?
- 5) **Mother's Personal History:** Were you abused or neglected in childhood? Have you been in an abusive or coercive relationship?
- 6) **Parents Relationship:** Do you have a partner? Do and your partner have a strong relationship? Is there any verbal or physical abuse in your relationship?
- 7) **Social Support:** Do you have friends that you can call if you need them? Do you have someone near by who can help you with the baby once he is born?
- 8) **Life Stressors:** Are you under financial stress right now? Are there major life transitions, outside of pregnancy, that you are facing?

Risk Factors After Pregnancy:

- 1) **Birth Trauma:** Did your birth go differently than you had planned? Did you ever feel afraid that you or your baby would die? Do you have upsetting memories of the birth?
- 2) **Baby Temperament:** Does it feel that your baby is sleeping worse than other babies? Does it seem like your baby is crying more than other babies? Do you feel unable to soothe your baby?

It makes sense for all women to have a plan for how they will cope emotionally during the postpartum period. For many women, establishing a good routine, making time for self-care and reaching out for extra support is enough to prevent serious perinatal concerns. However, those who are more vulnerable to depression and anxiety should have a plan in place that includes finding a mental health providers prior to the postpartum period.

General Guidelines for Postpartum Self-Care:

- 1) **Make a plan to stay active during pregnancy and postpartum.** What has worked for you in the past to stay active? Would it make sense to put a gym membership (with childcare) on your baby registry? Or would you rather find someone to walk with outdoors?
- 2) **Surround yourself with support.** If you don't have a good network of friends who are parents, now is the time to make them. Joining a parenting group, attending a breastfeeding support group, attending birthing classes or joining a church/fellowship can all be ways of making new friends.
- 3) **Improve your primary relationship.** All couples can benefit from some relationship coaching. Improving your relationship now, and talking through your expectations and fears about parenthood, can make you a stronger couple as you enter this big transition.
- 4) **Reduce life stressors.** As best you can, work to get your stress level down before the baby comes. Say "no" to new commitments. Spend down your debts.
- 5) **Take more time to relax.** Go for walks. Get a massage. Try yoga or meditation.
- 6) **Journal your thoughts.** Pregnancy can be a time filled with excitement but also with worries and uncertainty. Writing down your thoughts gives you more perspective. Notice if you are thinking in extremes, being self-critical or expecting the worst.
- 7) **Prepare for breastfeeding.** There is some evidence that breastfeeding can be preventative to perinatal mood issues. However, most American women don't have much knowledge of, or experience with, breastfeeding. If breastfeeding is part of your plan, attending a breastfeeding support group (like La Leche League) during pregnancy can help prepare you to get your breastfeeding relationship off to a great start.
- 8) **Hire a doula.** Having a doula during pregnancy, birth and postpartum improves your chances of having a healthy birth and of getting your mothering relationship off to a great start.
- 9) **Embrace change.** You may have counted on keeping your life orderly and in control. Finding ways to open yourself to the possibility of life being a bit messy and topsy-turvy. Do readings, meditate or ask a trusted mentor for guidance about opening yourself to change and releasing your need for control.

For those with elevated risk, these extra steps may be helpful.

- 1) **Find a therapist before you need one:** A therapist can help you work through past trauma and abuse, your fears about parenthood and help you make a plan to address perinatal issues. Having a therapist before you give birth makes it more likely you will get help before your symptoms become severe.
- 2) **Make a plan for meds.** If you've taken medication before, or if you feel that you are at high risk for perinatal depression or anxiety, talk to a psychiatrist about what medications might be acceptable for you to use during pregnancy and breastfeeding. You can also call the Infant Risk Center at Texas Tech (806.352.2519) to ask about medications you've taken in the past. Even if medications aren't your first choice, having a back-up plan is

useful so that you know you have something to fall back on if your symptoms begin to interfere with life.