

# Postpartum Depression

*Excerpted from "Feelings After Birth," copyright pending.*



The birth of a baby is a time of wonder and joy. It is also be a time of great change, hard work and concern, especially for a new mother. Every mother has different circumstances and support systems and every mother deals with these feelings in a different way.

For some, the support of family and friends is enough to make the transition into successful motherhood. For others, it is not uncommon to feel anxiety or lingering concern. Some mothers even sense something might be terribly wrong. These are feelings associated with postpartum depression.

## ***What is Postpartum Depression?***

Postpartum depression ("PPD") is an "umbrella term" used to describe a variety of emotional problems that can affect a mother after childbirth. There is no single definition for PPD. Instead, it is described as a group of symptoms that can negatively affect a mother after her baby is born. These symptoms change her behavior, personality and outlook.

Symptoms of PPD may include:

- sadness, depression or hopelessness
- fatigue, sluggishness or exhaustion
- poor concentration, confusion or memory loss
- uncontrollable crying, irritability or anger
- appetite and/or sleep disturbance
- over-concern for the baby
- lack of interest in the baby
- guilt, inadequacy or worthlessness
- lack of interest in previously enjoyed activities
- fear of harming the baby or herself

## ***Who is Affected?***

Any mother within about a year of childbirth can be affected. Mothers who have miscarried or weaned a baby from breastfeeding may also be affected. PPD can affect any woman regardless or race, income, age education or religion.

PPD runs its course in a highly individualized manner. It may strike a new mother while she is still in the hospital or it may gradually build up over several weeks or months after childbirth.

## ***Why Does it Happen?***

PPD in all its variations is not fully understood. However, we know that the post-childbirth period is a time of tremendous change in health and life circumstances. Several factors have been clearly identified with PPD: tremendous hormone shifts; sleep disruptions; and genetic factors. The social and psychological adjustments which place many demands on a new mother and her family may also contribute.

## **Levels of Postpartum Depression**

PPD can begin immediately after birth or anytime during the first year. The symptoms range from mild blues to total despair. Serious depression- a constant, intense sad and

empty feeling that lasts two weeks or more- is a problem that requires medical help. All forms of PPD can be treated.

### ***Baby Blues***

The "Baby Blues" are the most common form of postpartum depression. 50 - 80% of new mothers experience the blues within the first few days following childbirth.

Symptoms are mild and short-lived, usually disappearing within two weeks.

Symptoms include:

- crying for no apparent reason
- impatience
- irritability
- restlessness
- anxiety

### ***Postpartum Depression***

Also called postpartum adjustment disorder, this depression can occur within days of delivery or appear gradually, sometimes as late as a year following childbirth. One in nine new mothers experience some degree of postpartum depression.

A mother suffering from postpartum adjustment disorder may experience one or a combination of symptoms. The symptoms may be mild or severe and last at least two weeks. Although PPD does not show the same symptoms in all mothers, all symptoms can be equally distressing.

### ***Postpartum Mood/Anxiety Disorder***

Some mothers may not experience typical symptoms of depression, but may find themselves feeling very nervous or anxious in the days and weeks following childbirth.

Symptoms include:

- intense anxiety or nervousness
- restlessness
- sleep disturbance
- palpitations or increased heart rate
- shaking or tremors
- Tightness in chest or rapid breathing
- dizziness
- hot or cold flashes, sweating

### ***Postpartum Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder***

This PPD is characterized by intrusive thoughts, images or behaviors that a mother feels unable to control. She recognizes that her thoughts and behaviors are unusual and this causes her great concern

Symptoms include:

- intrusive, repetitive thoughts (usually related to the baby's health or safety)
- avoidance of the baby
- anxiety or restlessness
- sleep disturbance, nightmares
- depression
- compulsive behaviors, such as repeated hand washing, checking on the baby or safety rituals

### ***Postpartum Psychosis***

Postpartum psychosis is relatively rare, occurring in approximately one out of 1000

women. This is a severe illness and onset can be sudden (usually within 2 weeks after childbirth). This PPD requires immediate professional attention.

Symptoms include:

- hallucinations
- delusions
- extreme agitation
- severe insomnia
- suicidal thoughts or plans
- thoughts or plans of harming the baby
- bizarre behavior

## **Treatment and Steps to Take**

### ***Treatment***

If a mother is experiencing any of the symptoms associated with PPD, she should first seek the medical advice of her physician. Treatment options vary depending on the severity of the symptoms and the mother's situation. They may include greater support from friends and family members, support groups, counseling, medication or in-patient treatment. With treatment and support, a mother can fully recover. Left untreated, PPD can linger indefinitely.

### ***Steps to Take***

- Do not be afraid to ask for help. PPD is not your fault.
- Seek the support of a friend or family member.
- See your doctor if your symptoms are too burdensome or dangerous to cope with yourself.

***The information provided at this site is intended only as a complement to the advice and treatment of your health care professionals.***