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Series Editor: Dr Philip Timms  
Expert Review: Dr Roch Cantwell  
Editorial Board: Dr Ros Ramsay, Dr Martin Briscoe, Deborah Hart  
User and carer input: Royal College of Psychiatrists' Special Committee of Patients and Carers

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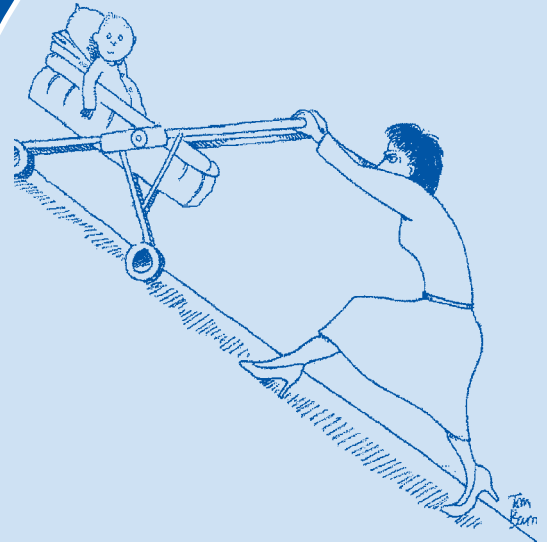


Royal College of Psychiatrists

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Help is  
at hand

# Post Natal Depression



The Royal College of Psychiatrists

## About this leaflet

This leaflet is for anyone who suffers from postnatal depression (PND for short). We hope it will also be helpful to family and friends and to anyone who wants to know more about this problem.

The leaflet describes what it's like to have PND, ways of helping yourself and some of the treatments available. There are references to research information and suggestions for further reading and help.

## What is PND?

Postnatal Depression is what happens when you become depressed after having a baby.

Sometimes, there may be an obvious reason, often there is none. It can be particularly distressing when you have so looked forward to having your baby through the months of pregnancy. You may feel guilty for feeling like this, or even feel that you can't cope with being a mother. It can last for weeks or several months. Mild PND can be helped by better support from family and friends; more severe PND will need extra help from your GP, health visitor or, in some cases, mental health professionals.



## How common is it?

Around 1 in every 10 women has PND after having a baby. If untreated, it can last for months, or sometimes longer.

## What does it feel like to have PND?

### Depressed

You feel low, unhappy and wretched for much or all of the time. You may feel worse at particular times of the day, like mornings or evenings. Sometimes, there are good days that make you hope that it is over. It can be very disappointing when they are followed by bad days. It can sometimes seem that life is not worth living.

### Irritable

You may get irritable with other children and, occasionally, with your baby. You are most likely to get 'ratty' with your partner, who may well wonder what is wrong.

### Tired

All new mothers get pretty weary, but depression can make you feel so utterly exhausted that you feel physically ill.

### Sleepless

When, at last, you get to bed you find you can't fall asleep. You wake at the crack of dawn, even if your partner has fed the baby overnight.

### Not hungry

Depressed mothers usually haven't the time or the interest to eat, and this can make you feel irritable and run down. On the other hand, if you find yourself eating for comfort, you may feel guilty and uncomfortable about getting fat.

### Unable to enjoy anything

You find that you can't enjoy or be interested in anything. This may be especially true of sex. Some women get interested in sex again before the 6 week postnatal check-up, but PND usually takes away any desire or enthusiasm. Your partner may seek the comfort and excitement of intercourse, but you don't. This can put a further strain on the relationship. There are, of course, many other reasons for you to lose interest in sex after having a baby – it may be painful, you may be too tired, or you may be just trying to adjust to having a child.

### Unable to cope

PND can make you feel that you have too little time, do nothing well, and that you can't do anything about it. It can be hard to establish a new routine to cope with the baby, as well as everything else.

### GUILTY

Depression alters your thinking, making you see things in a negative light. This can produce feelings of guilt and self-blame that you are responsible for your illness, or of no help to your family.

### Anxious

You may find that you are afraid to be alone with your baby. You may worry that he or she might scream, or choke, or be harmed in some way. Instead of feeling close to your baby, you may feel detached. You can't work out what your baby is feeling, or what your baby needs.

Even if you have strong loving feelings for your baby, you can still feel anxious. Most new mothers worry about their baby's health, but PND can make this overwhelming. You worry that you might lose your baby through infection, mishandling, faulty development or a 'cot death'. You worry about 'snuffles', or how much weight has been (or not been) gained. You worry if your baby is crying or is too quiet (has the baby stopped breathing?). Sometimes, you may even worry that you might harm your baby. You may find that you need reassurance all the time from your partner, the health visitor, the GP, your family or a neighbour.

You may also worry about your own health. You may feel panicky – your pulse races, your heart thumps and you may feel that you have heart disease or are on the brink of a stroke. Your tiredness may make you wonder if you have some dreadful illness, or if you will ever have any energy again.

Even the most capable person can feel frightened and unable to cope with all this, wanting desperately to cling to their partner.

## Other mental health problems after childbirth

### Baby Blues

On the third or fourth day after having a baby, about half of new mothers feel a bit weepy, flat and unsure of themselves. This is known as the 'Baby Blues', and it passes after a few days.

### Puerperal Psychosis

This is a serious condition, which needs urgent support and treatment. It affects around 1 in 500 women, usually within days or weeks of childbirth. You may have rapid mood swings, strange or bizarre beliefs or hear voices and can behave in odd and unpredictable ways – if so, you will need medical help and support. This may have to be in hospital, where you can have your baby with you while you recover. It is more likely to happen if you have:

- a family history of puerperal psychosis
- a family history of bipolar (manic-depressive) illness
- a previous episode of puerperal psychosis or bipolar disorder.

It is important to let your doctors and midwives know about any of these factors while you are pregnant because your treatment can reduce the risk of it happening. Although it is a serious condition, the proper treatment will mean that you can make a full recovery.

### Depression in pregnancy

It's important to know that depression can occur during pregnancy as well. This is more common

than people think, and can be helped in much the same way as with postnatal depression.

## When does PND happen?

Most cases of PND start within a month of the birth, but it can start up to six months later.

## What causes PND?

We don't know enough about why women get PND to be sure who will or won't suffer from it. There is probably no single reason, but a number of different stresses may add up to cause it. We know you are more likely to have PND if you:

- have had depression (especially PND) before
- do not have a supportive partner
- have a premature or sick baby
- lost your own mother when you were a child
- have experienced several stresses in a short period of time. These could be things like a bereavement, you or your partner losing a job, or housing and money problems.

In spite of this, you can still have PND when none of these things have happened and there is no obvious reason. On the other hand, having these problems does not necessarily mean that you will get PND.

## What about hormones?

Levels of oestrogen, progesterone (and other hormones to do with conception and birth) drop suddenly after the baby is born. How exactly

they affect your mood and emotions is not clear. No real differences have been found in the hormone changes of women who do and do not get PND and research does not suggest that this is a major reason for depression. Hormone changes may be more important in the 'baby blues' and puerperal psychosis.

## Do women with PND harm their babies?

This is very rare – although depressed mothers often worry that it might happen. It can help to talk these feelings over with your health visitor or doctor.

Occasionally, through utter tiredness and desperation, you might feel like hitting or shaking your baby. Many mothers (and fathers) occasionally feel like this, not just those with PND. In spite of having these feelings at times, most mothers never act on them. This is also true in PND.

## What can be done?

The first thing is to recognise the depression for what it is. In the past it has often been overlooked or dismissed as the 'baby blues'. You may not realise what is wrong and feel ashamed to admit that you are less than thrilled by being a mother. You may worry that, if you do, your baby may be taken away. This is very unlikely. Your doctor, health visitor or midwife want to help you get better so you can enjoy and care for your baby.



People are now generally more aware of depression, so PND shouldn't be missed so often. A questionnaire, such as the Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale, can help health visitors and GPs to spot PND.

## Ways of helping yourself

Say how you feel:

- If you feel miserable, irritable, incompetent, frightened and not all that keen on your baby, then tell someone. Many other women have felt like this. If you don't feel you can talk to your family or friends, talk to your health visitor or GP. They will know that these feelings are common and will know how to help.
- Don't let the diagnosis frighten you. At least you know what is wrong, and that it is a problem that many other mothers have shared, and that you will get better in time. It can help your partner, friends and family to know this so they can understand what you are going through and know how to help.

## Ways for other people to help

- Don't be shocked or disappointed if your wife, partner, sister or girlfriend confesses that she has felt awful since the birth of her baby. Take the time to listen and make sure that she gets the help she needs.
- Try not to be shocked or disappointed by a diagnosis of PND – it can be well treated and your loved-one can get back to normal.
- Do all you can to help with the practical things that need to be done, while your partner does not feel up to doing them – shopping, feeding and changing the baby, or housework. It may be difficult for a while, but it is worth it.
- Make sure that you are clear about what is



“Jane darling  
isn't that the baby crying for you again?”

happening and that you get advice on how to help, especially if you are the mother's partner.

- Make sure that you have some support yourself. If this is your first baby, you may feel pushed to one side, both by the baby and by your partner's needs. Try not to feel resentful. Your partner needs your support and encouragement. Practical help with the baby,

sympathetic listening, patience, affection and being positive will go a long way. Your partner will appreciate this even when she's feeling better.

## What if I don't want treatment?

Most women will get better without any treatment after a period of weeks, months or sometimes longer. However, this can mean a lot of suffering. PND may spoil the experience of new motherhood, and strain your relationship with your baby and partner. So the shorter it lasts, the better. It's important to get help as soon as possible to relieve the depression and to support your developing relationship with your baby. This will help your baby's development in the long run.

## What about talking treatments?

It can be a great relief just to talk to a sympathetic, understanding, uncritical listener – this could be a friend, a relative, a volunteer or a professional. Many general practices now have a counsellor and trained health visitors who can help treat PND.

There are more specialised psychological treatments. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy can help you to understand and resolve the depression by examining how you think about yourself, the world and other people.

Psychotherapy can help you to understand the depression in terms of what has happened to you in the past.

These can be arranged through your GP, with a community psychiatric nurse, a psychologist or a psychiatrist.

### Are there problems with these treatments?

These treatments are usually very safe, but they can have unwanted effects. Talking about things may bring up bad memories from the past and this can make you low or distressed. Other people have found that therapy puts a strain on their relationship with their partner.

Make sure that you can trust your therapist and that they have the necessary training. Another problem with talking therapies is that they are still hard to get in some areas. There are long waiting lists, so you may not get any treatment for quite a while.

### What about tablets?

If you have a more severe depression, or it has not improved with support and reassurance, one of the antidepressant drugs will probably help. Antidepressants take two weeks or so to start working and should be taken for four to six months after you start to feel better.

### How do they work?

It is not entirely clear, but antidepressants affect the activity of two chemicals in the brain, serotonin (also called 5HT) and noradrenaline.

### Do antidepressants have side effects?

Modern antidepressants are relatively safe. They may cause nausea or an increase in anxiety in the early stages, but these usually wear off. Others can make you sleepy or give you a dry mouth. Make sure that your doctor knows if you are breast-feeding. For many antidepressants, there is no evidence that they cause problems for breastfed babies, so it is usually possible to breastfeed while taking them. However, this is your decision – your doctor can help with information and advice. Some people get withdrawal symptoms when they stop these medicines, so it's best to reduce slowly.

Hormones have been suggested as a treatment for PND. However, there is little evidence that they work, and they have their own dangers, particularly if you have had thromboses (blood clots in the veins) of any sort.

### Are there alternatives?

There is some evidence that regular exercise can boost your mood and help you to feel less isolated. It can be helpful to do this with other people.

### So which treatment is best?

Everyone can try the simple measures outlined in this leaflet. Talking treatments and antidepressants are equally effective, but antidepressants are more likely to be



recommended if the depression is severe or has gone on for a long time. They also work a bit quicker than talking treatments.

Talking treatments and antidepressants can be given together. Your GP or health visitor will be willing to give advice. It is also sometimes helpful to talk over the options with your family or a close friend. It is important that you feel comfortable with the choice of help or treatment.

## Mothers with special needs

Mothers who have a history of mental health problems or physical or learning disability do face additional problems, or, equally challenging, additional scrutiny. They should get extra help and support to keep mother and baby well.

## Self-help

We don't yet know enough about PND to prevent it in the first place, but certain principles make sense:

- DON'T try to be 'superwoman'. Try to do less during your pregnancy and make sure that you don't over-tire yourself. If you are at work, make sure you get regular meals and put your feet up in the lunch hour.
- DON'T move house (if you can help it) while you are pregnant or until the baby is six months old.
- DO make friends with other couples who are expecting or have just had a baby; among

other things, this could lead to a baby-sitting circle.

- DO find someone you can talk to. It helps so much to have a close friend you can turn to. (If you can't easily find someone, try the National Childbirth Trust or MAMA – their local groups are very supportive both before and after childbirth).
- DO go to ante-natal classes – and take your partner with you.
- DO keep in touch with your GP and your health visitor if you have suffered PND before. Any signs of PND can be recognised early and you can start treatment at once.

After the baby has arrived:

- DO take every opportunity to get your head down. Try to learn to cat-nap. Your partner can give the baby a bottle-feed at night. If you like, you can use your own expressed breast milk for this.
- DO get enough nourishment. Healthy foods like salads, fresh vegetables, fruit, fruit juices, milk and cereals are all good for you, packed with vitamins and don't need much cooking.
- DO find time to have fun with your partner. Try to find a baby-sitter and get out together for a meal or to see friends.
- DO let yourself and your partner be intimate if you can – at least kiss and cuddle, stroke and fondle. This will comfort you both and help bring about the return of full sexual feelings sooner. Do not feel guilty if this takes some time.
- DON'T blame yourself or your partner: life is tough at this time, and tiredness and irritability on both sides can lead to quarrels.



'Having a go' at each other may weaken your relationship when it needs to be at its strongest.

- DON'T be afraid to ask for help when you need it. If you have learnt about PND from ante-natal classes (and leaflets like this), you may spot the warning signs before anyone else.

FINALLY, even if you have been depressed for a while, support, counselling and medication can all help you to get better. It's never too late.

## Organisations that can help

**Association for Postnatal Illness**, 145 Dawes Road, Fulham, London SW6 7EB. Helpline: 020 7386 0868; [www.apni.org](http://www.apni.org). Provides support to mothers suffering from postnatal illness. It exists to increase public awareness of the illness and to encourage research into its cause and nature.

**CRY-SIS, BM-CRY-SIS**, London WC1N 3XX. Helpline: 08451 228669; [www.crysis.com/index.asp](http://www.crysis.com/index.asp). Provides self-help and support for families with excessively crying and sleepless babies.

**Depression Alliance Scotland**, 3 Grosvenor Gardens, Edinburgh EH12 5JU. Tel: 0845 123 23 20; e-mail: [info@dascot.org](mailto:info@dascot.org). Provides information, support and understanding for those affected by depression.

**Meet-A-Mum-Association (MAMA)**, 7 Southcourt Road, Linsdale, Leighton Buzzard, Beds LU7 2QF. Helpline: 0845 120 3746; [www.mama.co.uk](http://www.mama.co.uk). Self-help groups for mothers with small children and specific help and support to women suffering from postnatal depression.

**National Childbirth Trust**, Alexandra House, Oldham Terrace, Acton, London W3 6NH. Enquiry line: 0870 444 8707; Breastfeeding line: 0870 444 8708; [www.nct.org.uk](http://www.nct.org.uk). Advice, support and counselling on all aspects of childbirth and early parenthood.

**Samaritans**. Tel: 08457 909090 (UK) or 1850 609090 (Eire); E-mail: [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org); [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org). Provides confidential emotional support to any person who is suicidal or despairing.

## Books

*Feelings after birth: The NCT Book of Postnatal Depression*, Heather Welford Book Production Consultants.

*Coping with Postnatal Depression*, Sandra Wheatley, Sheldon Press, 2005.

*Mind Over Mood: Cognitive Treatment Therapy Manual for Clients*, Christine Padesky and Dennis Greenberger, Guilford Press, 1995.

*Overcoming Depression: A Five Areas Approach*, Christopher J Williams, Hodder Arnold, 2001.

## Websites

[www.livinglifetothefull.com/elearning](http://www.livinglifetothefull.com/elearning)  
Living Life to the Full is an online mental health lifeskills course supported by the Scottish Executive Health Department.

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