

Depression During Pregnancy

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You've taken the pregnancy test, and shared the good news with everyone. Anyone you tell chimes in with the same greeting, "Congratulations! You must be so happy!" Small gifts have started to trickle in a pair of booties, a maternity shirt proudly (and loudly!) announcing "Baby on the Way," a pregnancy journal. You're glad you're expecting, and yet, you're not quite ecstatic. You're downright unhappy sometimes, in fact, which makes matters worse because you feel guilty that you're looking at this pregnancy with a not-so-sunny disposition. Is something wrong with you? No.

What you need to know

Pregnancy can be a cheerful time, but not always, and not for every woman. At least 10 percent of pregnant women suffer from bouts of depression. But healthcare professionals often misdiagnose or disregard depression in pregnant women because they're conditioned, like the rest of us, to believe that this is a time of joy. "We live in a society that expects pregnant women to glow and be happy," says Karen Kleiman, a Philadelphia therapist. Consequently, Kleiman says, we are apt to gloss over any sadness or depression, chalking it up to the usual moodiness that comes with pregnancy. Unfortunately, if overlooked, depression during pregnancy can be dangerous, because it may hamper a mom's ability to care for herself and her developing baby.

Signs of depression

You may be suffering from depression if you feel some of the following symptoms:

- * Inability to concentrate
- * Anxiety
- * Extreme irritability
- * Sleep problems
- * Extreme or unending fatigue
- * A desire to eat all the time or not wanting to eat at all
- * A sense that nothing feels enjoyable or fun anymore
- * Persistent sadness

What causes it

Sometimes, pregnancy hormones -- which are raging as your body prepares for its nine-month odyssey -- are to blame, says Diane Sanford, a St. Louis psychologist and author of *The Postpartum Survival Guide* (New Harbinger Press, 800/748-6273). While hormonal ups and downs affect all pregnant women, some feel the swings more intensely. You may also want to examine the state of your personal relationships. If you aren't getting along well with your partner (a major cause of depression), be on guard.

Other causes

- * Family or personal history of depression If depression runs in your family, or if you have had past bouts yourself, you may be more likely to become depressed now that you're expecting.
- * Stressful life events Are you moving to a bigger home in anticipation of your baby's arrival? Are you having trouble at work? Any major life change such as a move, divorce, or job loss, can send you into a serious funk.
- * Problems with the pregnancy A troubled pregnancy -- for instance, one that requires weeks of bedrest or numerous genetic tests -- can take its emotional toll.
- * Infertility or previous pregnancy loss If you experienced many difficulties trying to get pregnant, or have miscarried in the past, you may find yourself worrying about the safety of this pregnancy.
- * Past history of abuse Pregnancy can trigger painful memories in women who have survived emotional, sexual, physical, or verbal abuse. Your body is changing beyond your control, which can bring up long buried issues and baggage. Your loss of control over your changing body may mirror the loss of control you felt when you were being abused.

How you can cope

- * Take it easy. Resist the urge to pack in as many chores as you can before the baby comes. You may think you need to set up the nursery, clean the house, or work as much as you can before you go on maternity leave, but you don't. Pencil yourself in on top of your to-do list. You won't have as much time for yourself once the baby's around. Read a book, have breakfast in bed, or go for a nice long walk around the neighborhood. Choose something that makes you feel good. Taking care of yourself is an essential part of taking care of your baby.
- * Talk it out. Air out your fears and worries about the future with your friends. Keep the lines of communication between you and your partner free and clear, too. You need his support, which he can only give if you're open with him.
- * Consider therapy. If you've tried everything to snap yourself out of a low spell for two weeks but nothing seems to work, call a professional. According to Kleiman, psychotherapy can work wonders for pregnant women suffering from depression. You may also benefit from antidepressants -- some of which are safe for pregnant women. Ask your doctor or midwife for a referral, or check with your insurance company for a list of mental health care providers. Do your homework and interview a few counselors before you pick one. You need to find someone you can feel safe with, and whom you trust.

When to worry

If you're suicidal or feeling disoriented and unable to handle your daily responsibilities, or if you're having panic attacks, seek professional help immediately. Seeing a therapist or psychiatrist is not a sign of weakness. It's a sign that you're a good mother who is willing to take the steps necessary to keep her baby and herself safe and healthy.

The bottom line

Fifty percent of women suffering from depression during pregnancy go on to develop postpartum depression, but therapy during pregnancy can reduce that number dramatically. According to Sanford, less than 2 percent of the expectant moms she treats go on to suffer postpartum depression.

In addition, building a support network now -- made up of friends, family members, your partner, doctor, or therapist -- means your helpers will already be in place when the baby is born. Early treatment is important, she says, because "once the baby's here, it'll be even harder to get the help you need."

First published September 13, 2000
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