

Postpartum depression



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Introduction

Postpartum depression is a condition that can happen during the first months after childbirth (or after miscarriage or stillbirth). Postpartum depression is not the usual "baby blues," which usually go away within a couple of weeks. The symptoms of postpartum depression can last for months. In rare cases, a woman may have a severe form of depression called postpartum psychosis. Treatment is very important in this case and the sooner treatment is initiated, the sooner the woman will feel better. Postpartum depression seems to be brought on by the changes in hormone levels that occur after pregnancy.

Overview and Facts

Postpartum depression is a common condition among postpartum women. According to the American Psychological Association (APA), the global rates of postpartum depression vary between 9-16% of postpartum women.

Symptoms

Symptoms of postpartum depression include:

- Feeling very sad, hopeless, and anxious
- Loss of pleasure in everyday activities
- Weight loss or gain
- Sleeping problems
- Loss of concentration

These symptoms can occur in the first day or two after the birth or they can follow the symptoms of the baby blues after a couple of weeks.

Causes and Risk Factors

Chances of getting postpartum depression increase with:

- A history of depression or postpartum depression
- Having poor support from the spouse, friends, or family
- Having a sick baby
- Having a lot of stress in life

The risk of postpartum psychosis can increase when a family member has bipolar disorder.

Tests and Diagnosis

For postpartum depression to be diagnosed, signs and symptoms of major depression must develop within four weeks of giving birth.

To distinguish between the baby blues and a more severe form of depression, the physician will ask for a full assessment for depression using specific tests and questionnaires. Also, the physician will ask for blood tests to determine whether a physical condition such as an underactive thyroid is contributing to the signs and symptoms.

Treatment

Postpartum depression is often treated by a combination of counseling and medication.

- **Counseling:** Therapy to help women with PMDD develop effective coping strategies may help many women.
- **Medications:** Antidepressants are one of the treatments for postpartum depression. If the woman is breastfeeding, she needs to inform her physician as there are some medications with little risk of side effects for the baby.
- **Hormone therapy:** Estrogen replacement may help counteract the rapid drop in estrogen that accompanies childbirth, which may ease the signs and symptoms of postpartum depression in some women. Research on the effectiveness of hormone therapy for postpartum depression is limited, however.

With appropriate treatment, postpartum depression usually goes away within a few months. In some cases, postpartum depression lasts much longer. It's important to continue treatment after you begin to feel better. Stopping treatment too early may lead to a relapse.

As for postpartum psychosis, it requires immediate treatment, often in the hospital (inpatient setting). A combination of medications — such as antidepressants, antipsychotic medications and mood stabilizers — may be used to control the signs and symptoms. Sometimes electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) is recommended as well.

Sources

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