

What is postnatal depression?

Half of all mothers feel low for a few days soon after having a baby, but only one in every ten will become depressed.

Depression is not just feeling blue, it means that you:

- have no appetite (or over-eat for comfort)
- can't cope
- feel anxious
- feel guilty
- are afraid to be alone with your baby
- think that life just isn't worth living.

Depression may last weeks or months and can start anywhere between 1 to 6 months after the birth.

What causes postnatal depression?

We don't know but you are more likely to have postnatal depression if:

- you have had depression before
- you do not have a supportive partner
- your baby is unwell
- you lost your own mother when you were a child, or
- you have had several stresses in a short time.

What can I do?

Health visitors and GPs will be looking out for depression. If you feel down, tell someone.

What about talking treatments?

Talking helps – this could be a friend, a relative, or a professional. Cognitive-behavioural therapy helps you to overcome depression by exploring how you think about yourself. Other types of therapy can help you to understand the depression in terms of what has happened to you in the past.

- Are there problems with therapy?

Taking treatments are very safe, but sometimes they may bring up bad memories from the past or put a strain on your relationship with your partner. A good therapist should avoid this.

What about antidepressants?

These may help if your depression is severe or not improving. They take a few weeks to start working and should be taken for 4 to 6 months.

- Do they have side-effects?

They can make you feel anxious or sick early on, but these usually wear off. They can make you sleepy or give you a dry mouth. It is possible to breastfeed while taking some antidepressants. Some people get withdrawal symptoms when they stop, so it's best to reduce slowly.

- Are there alternatives?

- Regular exercise can help – it can be easier if you do this with other people.
- Hormones probably don't work well and they have their own dangers, particularly if you have had thrombosis (blood clots in the veins).

Which treatment is best?

Talking treatments and antidepressants are equally effective but antidepressants are more likely to help if the depression is severe or has gone on for a long time. Talking treatments and antidepressants can be given together.

What if I don't want treatment?

You will probably get better without any treatment after a period of months. But depression may affect your relationship with your baby and partner. So the shorter it lasts, the better.

□ Preventing postnatal depression

We don't yet know enough about postnatal depression to prevent it in the first place, but these things make sense:

- DON'T
 - try to be 'superwoman' – make sure that you don't over-tire yourself
 - move house (if possible) when pregnant or until baby is 6 months old
 - blame yourself – life is tough at this time
 - be afraid to ask for help when you need it.
- DO
 - rest as much as you can
 - get enough nourishment
 - find time to have fun with your partner
 - let yourself and your partner be intimate if you can
 - make friends with other couples in a similar situation
 - find someone to talk to; if you can't, try the National Childbirth Trust (www.nct.org.uk) or Meet A Mum Association (www.mama.co.uk) – they organise groups
 - go to ante-natal classes – and take your partner
 - keep in touch with your GP and health visitor if you have had postnatal depression before.

□ What can a partner or family do?

- Take the time to listen.
- Try not to be shocked or disappointed by the diagnosis – it can be treated.
- Give practical help like shopping, feeding, changing the baby, or housework.

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