

THE POST NATAL BLUES

Mothers respond to motherhood in a diverse and complex way. While many experience a sense of delight and joy, many other women feel unhappiness, gloom and irritability in the aftermath of childbirth.

For some mothers, the experience of having and caring for a newborn baby may be different to what they expected, and they may feel let down or disappointed. Mothers may find that they are physically exhausted from looking after their baby around the clock and mothers who have older children may find that in attending to everybody else's needs, they frequently neglect themselves. For those having their first child, in particular, irreversible changes in lifestyle, identity and relationships take place at this time, and these require corresponding adjustments in the thinking and expectations of first time mothers.

What are the baby blues?

Childbirth appears to trigger off a spectrum of mood disturbance in women. In its mildest form, this can take the shape of the *baby blues* experienced by 50-75 per cent of mothers. It typically arises three days after delivery and lasts for a few days during which time you can feel fragile emotionally. This is likely to be related to hormonal changes which arise after giving birth, and generally resolves without specific treatment.

What is postnatal depression?

So called *postnatal depression* is a depression which comes on within weeks or months of having a baby and can affect up to one third of mothers. The symptoms can include appetite and weight loss, sleep disturbance and feeling tense. Diminished interest and concentration often accompanies this state, as does a lack of sexual responsiveness and tearfulness. At this time, couples may also experience difficulties in getting along with one another.

Many women do not acknowledge these feelings and frequently present themselves to their doctor because of their worries about their baby's health. Enquiries about their own health and well being often open the floodgates to disclosing their depression and sense of failure.

How is it treated?

Usually this condition clears up of its own accord. Occasionally, symptoms of postnatal depression are of a severity that mothers require medication. In general, mothers with postnatal depression make a full recovery and the recurrence rate of this condition in subsequent pregnancies is low.

Having good *practical and emotional* support can help keep postnatal depression at bay. Taking things easy at home, getting enough rest, and involving your partner in jointly caring for the baby are advised.

If you do become depressed and this does not clear up, you should seek the help of your GP who, if necessary, can refer you for more specialised help.

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