



Government of **Western Australia**
Department of **Health**

Postnatal anxiety and depression

What Dads and Mums need to know



Delivering a **Healthy WA**

Feelings and emotions after birth

Having a baby can be an exciting time, full of intense emotions. Some emotions may be good, while others can be more challenging.

When times get tough, it's important for both dads and mums to remember that they are not alone. Many services can help parents manage the challenges of early parenthood. There are also lots of things parents can do to support themselves and each other.

It's also worth noting that postnatal anxiety and depression are quite common and can affect all parents, not just first time parents. Around one in four Australians experience an anxiety disorder in their lifetime, but the postnatal period, in particular for women, is a time of increased risk. Research also shows around one in seven mothers and around one in ten fathers will experience postnatal depression (PND), but mild to moderate cases are sometimes not recognised by the individual themselves.

What is postnatal anxiety?

A little worry or anxiety is normal for parents following childbirth. You may ask yourself questions like "What if I make mistakes?" or "Will people think I'm a bad parent?" The trouble is, too much anxiety and distress can interfere with your ability to cope with daily activities and care for your baby. It may also stop you enjoying life and achieving what you want.

Feelings of anxiety or panic that last longer than two weeks may indicate an anxiety disorder that requires assessment and treatment.

It is quite common for people who feel this way to also experience depression, although it is possible to have anxiety without depression.

Signs and symptoms of postnatal anxiety

The experience of postnatal anxiety can vary from person to person, but usually includes several of the following:

Feelings

- anxious, scared or overwhelmed
- irritable, 'spaced-out' or 'on-edge'
- ashamed or embarrassed
- a sense of dread.

Behaviours

- avoidance, feeling immobilised or frozen
- restlessness, pacing, hyper-activity or rapid speech
- difficulty sleeping (e.g. worries keep you awake)
- compulsive behaviours (e.g. counting/checking).

Thoughts

- worry or concern for safety of self or others
- panic
- need for control or perfection
- obsessive, intrusive thoughts
- thoughts of worst case scenarios.

What is postnatal depression (PND)?

PND is depression occurring in the months following childbirth. The onset of PND tends to be gradual and may persist for many months and even years.

Some parents feel ashamed if they are not coping and so may try to hide their struggles. However, PND is a serious condition and if left untreated, it may develop into chronic depression or recur when another baby is born. It is not only disruptive to the sufferer's life but can also affect their partner, baby and other children.

Signs and symptoms of PND

The experience of PND can vary from person to person, but usually includes several of the following:

Feelings

- shame, guilt, failure, inadequacy or hopelessness
- tearfulness and persistent low mood

- confusion
- exhaustion.

Behaviours

- lack of interest or pleasure in activities normally enjoyed
- withdrawal from social contact
- lack of motivation
- inability to cope with daily routine
- poor self-care
- insomnia or excessive sleep
- not eating or over-eating.

Thoughts

- fear of being rejected by partner or baby
- worry about harm or death to partner or baby
- lack of concentration and poor memory
- wanting to run away or escape
- inability to think clearly or make decisions
- thoughts of suicide or self harm.

Some symptoms may not indicate a severe problem and may be a result of lack of sleep, which often happens with a new baby. However, a persistent low mood or loss of interest in pleasurable activities for longer than two weeks, together with other symptoms, may indicate clinical depression. This can be treated.

Anxiety, depression and dads

Men's experiences around pregnancy, labour, delivery and early parenthood can be very different from their partners'. While women usually start preparing themselves for parenthood during pregnancy, life changes for men are usually more marked after the birth, requiring a lot of adjustment.

Fatherhood is just as challenging as motherhood, though not always for the same reasons. You might think "I want to help with the baby, but I don't know how" or "It's stressful being the breadwinner." You may also find yourself faced with changes in your relationship, an increase in your household duties and the possibility of becoming the sole provider or a stay-at-home dad.

Whatever your circumstances, remember to value your role as a father and be as involved as you can. Your child and your partner need you in lots of different ways: offer your time, and ask how you can be of help.

However, if you are experiencing difficulties, seek help as soon as possible. Dads are also prone to emotional health issues around the birth of a baby and their risk increases significantly if their partner has suffered anxiety or PND.

Symptoms of anxiety or depression in men can differ from those experienced by women and may include feeling frustrated, vulnerable, stressed or even angry.

What causes anxiety and PND?

Postnatal anxiety and depression rarely develop because of one direct cause. Emotional or mental health problems are usually the result of many factors that interact in different ways for different people. Some common risk factors include:

- personal or family history of mental health issues
- depression and/or anxiety during pregnancy
- difficulties in relationship or being single
- lack of practical and emotional support
- stressful life events
- complications during the pregnancy or delivery
- being an adolescent parent, or an older parent
- personal history of substance misuse
- recently stopping some medications.

Treatment options

There are several treatment and support options for parents experiencing anxiety or depression following childbirth. These might include things like practical support in the home, lifestyle changes (e.g. diet, exercise), counselling, and medication. A combination of approaches usually achieves better results than medication alone. Some medications are safer than others when breastfeeding, so if

you have concerns you can call the Obstetric Drug Information Service on (08) 9340 2723.

Helping your partner

Ways to support mum

- Share household chores as much as possible.
- Take care of the baby so she can have some time for herself, even if it's only 15 minutes while she has a shower or goes for a walk.
- Encourage her to seek professional help if she needs it. It may also help to make the initial phone call for her or go with her to the appointment.
- Ask a child health nurse or lactation consultant about ways you can help with night-time feeds so she can get as much sleep as possible.

Ways to support dad

- Acknowledge his life has changed too.
- Encourage him to be involved with the baby and give him space to do this. Allow him to explore fatherhood without you “watching over” him and allow his confidence to grow.
- Give him credit. He may feel more comfortable in his role as a father than you realise.

- Remember that just because he does something differently to you, doesn't mean it's wrong.
- Be aware that he might become frustrated or anxious when he can't "fix" the problem.
- Invite him to attend appointments with you. This will involve him with his child and can be a chance for him to touch base with a health professional.

Helping yourself

- Remember you will need time-out, away from your partner and the baby. Also, remember to take time-out as a couple, or to be with supportive people.
- Accept reasonable offers of help.
- Talk to your partner or someone you trust about how you're feeling.
- Seek help from a professional like your GP or child health nurse.
- Value your own health and wellbeing and your role as a parent – it's a tough job, but a rewarding one.

Further information and assistance

Pregnancy Baby and Birth Helpline

 1800 882 436

Mental Health Emergency Response Line

 1300 555 788 (metro)

 1800 676 822 (Peel)

Rural Link (rural and remote)

 1800 552 002 (after hours)

Lifeline

 13 11 14

Mensline Australia

 1300 789 978 (24 hours 7 days)

Crisis Care

 (08) 9223 1111

 1800 199 008

From the Heart WA

www.fromtheheartwa.org.au

PANDA

(Post and Antenatal Depression Association)

 1300 726 306

www.panda.org.au

Ngala

 (08) 9368 9368

 1800 111 546

Australian Breastfeeding Association

 (08) 9340 1844

 1800 686 2 686

Meerilinga Dads in the Early Years

 (08) 9309 2377

Parenting WA Line

 (08) 6279 1200

 1800 654 432

ARAFMI Mental Health Carers and Friends Association

 (08) 9427 7100

Hey Dad WA

 (08) 9368 9379

 1800 111 546

**Raphael Centre
St John of God Healthcare**

 (08) 9382 6828

 1300 306 828

Beyond Blue

 1300 224 636 (info line)

www.beyondblue.org.au

Raising Children Network

www.raisingchildren.net.au

For more information and ways to help yourself and your partner:

www.wnhs.health.wa.gov.au/emotionalhealth.php

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a person with a disability.

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