

Postpartum Depression

Postpartum depression (PPD) is a mood disorder thought to affect 15-28% of new mothers. Many women (50-70% of new mothers) experience mood swings, sadness, anxiety, sleeplessness, and irritability, sometimes called the “baby blues” in the first 2 weeks postpartum. These feelings usually resolve by day 14 without the need for treatment. PPD generally has a slow and insidious onset, beginning at 2-3 weeks postpartum but can occur anytime within the first year and last up to a year if untreated. Symptoms of PPD include: agitation, anxiety or panic attacks, chronic exhaustion, clumsiness, confusion, decreased appetite or extreme cravings, depression, despair, difficulty relaxing or concentrating, emotional numbness, fear, feelings of inadequacy, frequent crying or inability to cry, guilt, hopelessness, inability to cope, inability to function, insomnia, irrational concern over baby’s well-being, irritability, joylessness, lack of attention to appearance, loneliness, loss of normal interests, memory loss, mood swings, nightmares, thoughts of hurting oneself or baby, and withdrawal from social contacts.

The causes of postpartum depression are varied and not well understood. The hormonal shifts, lifestyle and physical changes after the birth of a baby can all play a role. There may also be a genetic factor at play. Risk factors include smoking, previous history of depression, previous history of severe PMS including anxiety, breast tenderness, confusion, or headache, lack of social support, difficult newborn temperament, and unplanned pregnancy. Breast feeding mothers are significantly less likely to develop PPD. Thyroid insufficiency (hypothyroidism), often detected 2-5 months postpartum, can be a cause of PPD symptoms. The abrupt drop in insulin levels that occurs postpartum can also contribute to PPD. It is therefore key to maintain adequate caloric intake (4000 cal/day) to avoid low blood sugar levels which can severely affect mood. It has also been shown that a diet rich in complex carbohydrates, essential fatty acids, protein, B vitamins, zinc, and iron can be protective as well. Women that are anemic or have a significant blood loss at delivery are also at increased risk of PPD. Chronic fatigue, whether due to anemia, lack of support, or newborn temperament, especially by day 14 is also highly correlated with PPD.

Prevention of postpartum depression has already started. Learning about PPD and talking with your care provider about what to expect during the postpartum period can help you to establish realistic expectations and goals, as well as ensure you have adequate support. In the immediate postpartum ensuring you have plenty of delicious and nutritious food available and asking for help from friends and family can greatly ease your transition into motherhood. Ask a close friend to setup a dinner train (mealtrain.com), let people do your laundry and bring you groceries. And sleep whenever you can.

Prevention and Treatment

Diet

Dark leafy greens
Whole grains
Fatty fish: tuna, salmon
Seeds and nuts
Fresh fruit and melons

Supplements

1-3g/day of fish oil containing both DHA and EPA
100-200mg of 5-HTP three times a day
Prenatals

Aromatherapy

Several drops of oil to several tablespoons of carrier oil for direct application to skin, otherwise several drops of direct oil in bath, on pillow, or in diffuser
Melissa, creeping hyssop, lemon verbena, frankincense, and/or lavender

Herbs

A hot cup of tea soothes the soul
Mother Milk
1 ounce dried chamomile flowers
1 ounce dried catnip
¼ ounce fennel seeds
1/8 ounce dried lavender blossoms
1 tablespoon/cup up to 3 times a day

Postpartum Depression Brew

½ ounce dried, shredded licorice root
1 ounce dried, crumbled Raspberry leaf
1 ounce dried, finely cut rosemary leaf
1 ounce dried, cut skullcap
mix herbs together well, use 2 teaspoons per cup; 2 or more cups/day for 2 weeks to 2 months

ask your care provider for more herbal suggestions

Homeopathy, chiropractic, and massage are also recommended

Exercise

2 weeks postpartum you can begin walking 10-15 minutes twice a day
6 weeks postpartum you can begin to build back to your regular exercise routine or start one, 30 minutes of aerobic activity 3-5 times per week

References

[Botanical Medicine for Women's Health](#) Aviva Romm
[Wise Woman Herbal for the Childbearing Year](#) Susan S. Weed

