

Expecting parents: emotional wellbeing and mental health

Expecting parents experience a range of feelings and emotions that might seem to contradict each other. There can be both excitement and joy, as well as nervousness and uncertainty. There are physical changes to get used to, along with other potentially stressful adjustments to be made.

Mental health matters too

Many expecting parents focus on their physical health and forget to mentally prepare themselves for becoming a parent, whether it is the first time or if they are adding to their existing children.

There is a lot to get used to as the baby develops, so it can be a vulnerable time for many expecting parents. However, there are a number of additional factors which could make an expecting parent more likely to develop **antenatal anxiety or depression** (antenatal means during pregnancy).

Many people are aware of the risk of mental health issues after baby is born (postnatal). However, up to one in five women will have anxiety or depression in pregnancy; many expecting fathers and non-birth parents are also affected.

Risk factors

If you are expecting a baby there will already be a lot of changes to adjust to. So a degree of anxiety and 'ups and downs' is normal. However there are a number of risk factors making some women and men more vulnerable to antenatal anxiety and depression.

These include:

- Prior history of mental illness
- Lack of support (including partner, family and broader social support)
- Past abuse or trauma
- Unplanned pregnancy
- Stressful events
- Past conception issues or losses

- Pregnancy complications
- Absence of your own parents
- Pre-existing physical illness

Many expecting parents who are affected by these risk factors will become parents with few complications. But many others will struggle, and may develop antenatal anxiety or depression. There are also many expecting parents who have minimal or no risk factors, who will also develop antenatal anxiety or depression.

Common symptoms

Signs and symptoms vary a great deal. Common symptoms include:

- Panic attacks (racing heart, palpitations, shortness of breath, shaking or feeling physically 'detached' from your surroundings)
- Persistent, generalised worry, often focused on fears for the health or wellbeing of baby
- Developing obsessive or compulsive behaviours
- Abrupt mood swings
- Being nervous, 'on edge', or panicky

'I put any negative feelings down to hormones, I realise now that it went beyond the normal worry and stress of pregnancy. I found myself quickly all consumed by doubt and fear all the time.'

- Feeling constantly sad, low, or crying for no obvious reason.
- Feeling constantly tired and lacking energy
- Having little or no interest in all the normal things that bring joy (like time with friends, exercise, eating, or partner time)
- Sleeping too much or not sleeping very well at all
- Losing interest in intimacy
- Withdrawing from friends and family
- Being easily annoyed or irritated
- Finding it difficult to focus, concentrate or remember (people with depression often describe this as a 'brain fog')
- Engaging in risk-taking behaviour (for example, alcohol or drug use)
- Having thoughts of death or suicide, or self-harm.

Physical changes can have emotional impacts

Many changes happen to an expecting mum's body as her baby grows. Apart from the growing belly, there are things like morning sickness, fluid retention, stretch marks, itchy skin and swollen feet. And that's during an uncomplicated pregnancy.

It's normal to have emotional responses to these changes. However, when more complicated physical issues arise it's common for those responses to be greatly intensified. They can also potentially lead to antenatal anxiety or depression. Physical complications include: hyperemesis (severe nausea), gestational diabetes, thyroid issues and placenta previa (when the placenta implants low, so baby can't be born vaginally).

If you suspect you are experiencing any of these or other complications, seek the advice of a trusted medical professional. And if you experience any negative emotional and mental health impacts from pregnancy complications, please also seek support.

Dads and non-birth parents

During pregnancy there's often a focus on the pregnant mother and growing baby. However, dads and non-birth parents in LGBTIQ parent families can also struggle with their mental health or emotional wellbeing. Although they are not carrying the baby, the other risk factors for depression and anxiety apply — and their mental health is just as important, including the wellbeing of their growing family.

Seek support early

If you believe you might be experiencing antenatal anxiety or depression – or are simply confused about what you are feeling – seek help as early as you can. And remember, what you're feeling is real. This illness is treatable and you will be able to feel better.

It can be difficult to share such thoughts and feelings. But it is important for those around you to be aware of the difficulties you are experiencing, so they can support you through your recovery.

PANDA's Perinatal Anxiety & Depression Helpline

The PANDA Helpline provides counselling, referral and peer support from parents who have been through similar challenges. When you call, you will speak with a counsellor who understands the challenges of being an expecting parent. They will listen with kindness and compassion and together you will work out a way forward. Helpline staff can also provide access to appropriate specialist services.

If you are concerned for your own safety or that of someone else, it's vital that you seek immediate help by contacting either a GP or your nearest hospital's emergency department. You can also contact PANDA for advice and support. If you believe that someone's life is at immediate risk, then call 000.

