

1 in 5 new mums will suffer with postnatal illness. A shocking statistic that comes as a terrible blow to women and families affected by the illness.

It is often assumed that motherhood will be a time of great joy and satisfaction and when this doesn't happen for a woman she might be left feeling a failure or a bad mum. Of course nothing could be further than the truth and that is where this leaflet comes in – to explain about postnatal illness, its effects, treatments and ways that those around can help.

Symptoms

- feeling tired and unable to enjoy anything, perhaps not feeling able to get up in the morning or 'make and effort'
- Feelings of being a 'bad mother' or unable to cope with anything.
- physical symptoms, such as chest pain, headaches and nausea
- being unusually irritable and/or tearful
- – wanting to sleep more or not being able to get to sleep (insomnia)
- feeling numb, not feeling love towards partner or baby

- panic attacks or overpowering anxiety, when alone in the house, shopping, being with others
- difficulty in concentrating or making decisions
- obsessive fears about the baby's health or wellbeing, or about yourself and other members of the family
- Thoughts about death.
- Thoughts of, or actual, self harm.

What causes postnatal illness?

Postnatal illness strikes indiscriminately, regardless of class, family or race. However, we do know that there are several factors that may increase the risk of a woman being affected these include:

- A difficult pregnancy or birth
- Childhood experiences of mother (this may include abuse or own relationship with mother)
- Hormonal imbalance
- Social isolation
- A sense of bereavement for the mothers 'old life'
- A personal, or family, history of mental illness
- Other stresses around time of pregnancy or birth (eg. Moving house)

Treatment

Being offered the right treatment is essential for a swift, successful recovery. This means

seeking help from health care professionals involved directly in the new mothers care – GP, Health visitor or midwife for example.

Often women feel a stigma attached to admitting that they feel unwell or unable to cope with the demands of motherhood but these health care professionals are trained in dealing with postnatal illness and can help,

The help offered may be a course of antidepressant medication, counselling (or other appropriate therapy) extra 'listening visits' every week or so, Homestart support (a voluntary organisation who offer help and support to families that need it or a referral to a specialist – a perinatal psychiatrist. In the case of severe postnatal illness (puerperal psychosis, for example) some time in hospital may be necessary until the unwell mother is stabilised.

How can partners, families or friends help?

If you are caring for a woman with postnatal illness it can be extremely frightening, frustrating and lonely at times. Please remember that this is an illness that WILL get better and that she needs your help and support now, more than ever. There are some ways that you can try to help listed below but you will find that on occasion your efforts will not be gratefully received – this isn't your loved one talking but the illness, please try to be patient and not take it personally.



- Reassure her that she IS a good and loving mum/partner and that the feelings that tell her otherwise are the illness 'talking'
- Encourage her to rest as we know that fatigue can act as a catalyst to postnatal illness.
- Help with housework – if finances allow, employ some extra help to take this on whilst she is unwell.
- Do not be critical as she is hypersensitive to this right now and feeling extremely vulnerable.
- Help her to maintain a healthy diet – hunger leads to low blood sugar levels which in turn can make moods swing. Perhaps encourage her to eat little but often.

- If people offer help – don't turn it away, meals that can be put in the freezer are very helpful right now!
- Tell her that you know she is unwell and that you still care - reassure her that this is temporary and that she will get better.

Self help for postnatal illness

As well as the conventional treatments already mentioned, there are some other things you can do to help with postnatal illness. These include

- Not allowing your blood sugar levels to drop – eat small but often and avoid processed, sugary or fatty foods. Instead opt for carbohydrates that will help maintain a better sugar balance whilst maintaining your mood.
- Avoid too much caffeine and sugary drinks – these can make your mood go rapidly 'high', swiftly followed by a sustained low.
- Depression super foods include – bananas, turkey and eggs!
- Sleep as often as you feel the need to!
- Housework will still be there tomorrow – don't tire yourself out by doing cleaning; this will make postnatal illness worse.
- PNI is often worse in the premenstrual time – the natural remedies agnus castus, starflower oil and evening primrose oil have been found to help with this.

Postnatal illness and Breastfeeding

Quite often women will not see their GP if they think they have PNI as they are concerned that they will be told they have to stop breastfeeding in order to take medication.

This is not the case – there are several drugs that can be safely taken during breastfeeding as only trace amounts pass into the breast milk.

It is however worth weighing up the pros and cons – a breastfed baby may sleep less due to breast milk being so easily digested and we know that fatigue will make PNI worse. Equally a woman who gives up breastfeeding before SHE feels ready to might suffer feelings of guilt and failure – the decision has to be hers and she will need time to decide for herself.

For further information and support, please visit

www.mothersvoice.org.uk

Email info@mothersvoice.org.uk

 **mother's voice**
Ensuring that families affected by maternal mental illness are heard and supported