

Understanding Motherhood and Mood



Baby Blues and Beyond

If you don't feel like crying in the first few days or weeks after becoming a parent, then consider yourself lucky. If you are a new mother, however, odds are you have encountered the hard-to-explain bouts of sadness or feeling "down" that seem to arrive soon after the delivery of your baby. It's often called the "baby blues," and it affects between 70 percent and 80 percent of all new mothers.

Crying and a very real sadness are main symptoms of the baby blues. Other symptoms can include problems sleeping, fatigue, strong emotional reactions, and changes in body weight.

Hormones as Triggers

It's hard to say exactly what causes the baby blues, but there is a medical explanation for at least some of the symptoms: the hormonal changes a new

mother's body is going through. When a woman is pregnant, her body produces the female hormones estrogen and progesterone in much greater amounts. But in the first 24 hours after childbirth, these hormone levels drop rapidly back down to their non-pregnant levels. Researchers believe these sudden hormone changes may lead to depression in a similar way that menstrual hormone changes can trigger these symptoms.

In some women, another possible cause of these symptoms following pregnancy is a drop in thyroid hormones, which are produced by the thyroid gland (located in the neck). These hormones help regulate the way your body uses energy. Low thyroid levels can cause depressed or irritated moods, problems with sleep and concentration, and weight gain.

Combine these changes in your body with the dramatic changes in your life — the normal feelings of being overwhelmed with new responsibilities, pressures to be a “great” mom, a sense of loss regarding the life you had before — and you have a recipe for the baby blues.

Getting Through the Baby Blues

For most women, the baby blues is temporary — it's usually gone within a few days or a week after childbirth. The symptoms aren't usually severe, and there are fairly simple and effective ways to handle them:

- Get plenty of sleep. Take naps when your baby does.
- Take the pressure off yourself. You can't do everything by yourself — who can? Do what you can, and leave the rest for later or for others to take care of.
- Avoid spending too much time alone.
- Get help and support from your spouse or partner, family members, and friends.
- Join a support group for new mothers.
- Get plenty of exercise.

Bluer Than Blue

For 1 out of 10 new mothers, the blues progress to full-blown postpartum depression that can get bad enough to make it hard for you to care for your baby or yourself. It can last anywhere from weeks to months and usually requires counseling and treatment. New mothers who find themselves overwhelmed, frustrated, anxious, persistently teary, or depressed and unable to explain or shake these feelings, should not suffer in silence or shame. Instead, they should talk with their doctors right away and get the support — and in some cases, the treatment — they need.

Symptoms of postpartum depression can range from mild to severe. They can include the same symptoms of the baby blues, but can also include:

- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, or anxiety
- Lacking energy or motivation
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Trouble focusing, remembering, or making decisions
- Loss of interest in the activities you usually enjoy
- Withdrawal from friends and family



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For mothers with postpartum depression, there are effective treatments. Most often, treatment will include some combination of antidepressant medication, talk therapy, and support group therapy. Some antidepressants may pose health risks for breastfeeding babies or pregnant women, so it is important to discuss this carefully with your doctor before taking antidepressant medicines.

If you are diagnosed with postpartum depression, there are things you can do to help yourself in addition to following your doctor's treatment plan. The same tips for getting through the baby blues can be very helpful in getting through postpartum depression. Whatever steps you and your doctor decide are best, it's important that you stick to a treatment plan for depression.

At the Extreme: Postpartum Psychosis

For every 1,000 new mothers, 1 will face an even more daunting condition: postpartum psychosis. The symptoms typically begin during the first 6 weeks after delivery and can include:

- Rapid mood swings
- Delusions
- Confusion
- Hallucinations
- Sleep disturbances
- Obsessive thoughts about the baby

Women who have been diagnosed with bipolar disorder or a condition called schizoaffective disorder are at higher risk for getting postpartum psychosis. Women with postpartum psychosis require immediate medical attention, often including hospitalization. Whenever any of these symptoms are present, it's very important that you speak to a health care professional as soon as possible. ●