

# Care for Mom: Maternal Mental Health Matters

By Sheldon Riklon, M.D.

Maternal mental health is an important part of a woman's health and well-being during pregnancy and after childbirth. While pregnancy and becoming a parent can bring joy and excitement, it can also leave you feeling stressed, overwhelmed, and exhausted, which can take a toll on your mental and emotional health.

According to the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 1 in 8 women experience postpartum depression in the U.S., so this Mental Health Awareness Month, remember that maternal mental health conditions are common, treatable, and nothing to be ashamed of.

Maternal mental health includes a woman's emotional, psychological, and social well-being during pregnancy and the postpartum period, affecting how a person thinks, feels, handles stress, connects with others, and makes decisions.

Challenges and changes to your mental health can happen during pregnancy or anytime in the first year after giving birth and can take the form of several mental health conditions, including:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Panic disorder
- Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Bipolar disorder
- Substance use disorders
- Postpartum psychosis

## The “Baby Blues” versus Postpartum Depression

After childbirth, many mothers may experience emotional changes while adjusting to caring for a newborn and recovering from birth. Sometimes, moms may experience what is called the “baby blues,” which can include mood swings, crying, irritability, and trouble sleeping. These symptoms usually show up two to three days after birth and last for only about two weeks.

When these symptoms last longer and become more serious, it becomes postpartum depression.

Postpartum depression (PPD) is a mental health condition that affects your emotional and physical health. The exact cause is unknown, but several factors may increase the risk, like hormone changes, a history of mental illness, traumatic birth experiences, stress, or substance use.

Some of the signs and symptoms to watch for include:

- Loss of interest in activities

- Withdrawal from family and friends
- Difficulty bonding with the baby
- Changes in appetite or sleep
- Extreme tiredness or low energy
- Feelings of guilt, shame, or worthlessness
- Trouble concentrating
- Thoughts of harming yourself or your baby

If you experience any of these symptoms, contact your doctor or healthcare provider as soon as possible. Getting help early can improve health outcomes for both you and your baby. In an emergency, call 911 or contact the National Suicide & Crisis Lifeline by calling or texting 988.

## **Support and Treatment**

If you are diagnosed with postpartum depression, your doctor will work with you to create a treatment plan, which may include one or a combination of the following:

**Counseling or Therapy:** Talking with a mental health professional can help you understand your feelings, manage stress, and learn healthy coping skills.

**Support Groups:** Peer support groups allow mothers to connect and share their experiences with one another to help reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation.

**Medications:** Some medications may safely help manage depression, anxiety, or other conditions during pregnancy and postpartum, but you should talk with your doctor about the risks and benefits.

**Self-Care:** Taking care of yourself is an important part of mental wellness, and creating healthy habits can help improve your mood, reduce stress, support emotional wellness, and help you feel better.

Here are some tips for self-care:

- Get enough rest
- Eat nutritious foods
- Include regular movement and exercise into your daily routine
- Ask for help when needed
- Stay connected with supportive friends and family

## **Maternal Mental Health Affects Families**

Maternal mental health affects not only mothers but also babies, partners, and families. Untreated maternal mental health conditions may contribute to:

- Difficulty bonding with the baby
- Increased stress within the household

- Challenges with breastfeeding or infant care
- Delays in child development
- Increased risk of preterm birth or low birth weight
- Long-term emotional and behavioral concerns in children

Utilizing community-based support can make a difference. Community health workers, doulas, home visiting programs, faith communities, and local organizations can help families find resources, education, and emotional support. These support systems can also help reduce stigma and encourage open conversations about mental health.

The UAMS Institute for Community Health Innovation offers access to perinatal community health workers and other support services. Learn more at [communityhealth.uams.edu](https://communityhealth.uams.edu).

Maternal mental health is an important part of maternal and infant health. Even though emotional struggles during pregnancy and postpartum are common, help and support are available. Remember, you are not alone.

To learn more about postpartum depression and maternal mental health, visit [acog.org](https://acog.org).

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