Maternity
Frimley Park Hospital

Antenatal and Postnatal Depression
and other emotional difficulties during pregnancy and after birth

Information for patients, relatives and carers
Pregnancy can be a very stressful time and it is normal to feel some emotional changes during this period, particularly when you are undergoing hormonal changes related to pregnancy.

Experiencing mental health difficulties can have a negative impact on your motivation which makes it even more difficult to seek help. This may leave you with the feeling that you are struggling all alone.

**Share this leaflet with friends and family to help them understand what you may be experiencing and how they can help.**

**What do I need to know?**

You are the most important person in your baby’s life. It can be easy to forget about your own needs during pregnancy and in the early months after birth because the main focus is on your baby. As these are the most vulnerable months of your baby’s life, it is vital that you are as healthy as possible throughout this period.

Approximately 1 in 5 women experience depression, anxiety, or other emotional difficulties during this period. For some women, these may not be severe and don’t last very long. For others, they become worse which can make it difficult to enjoy motherhood and get on with life.

If you experience these difficulties, it is essential that you are given the right type of support as soon as possible. There are a range of different treatments and services available to help with your recovery.
**What are ‘baby blues’?**
After birth, a woman's body experiences a significant change in hormone levels. ‘Baby blues’ are extremely common after giving birth whilst a woman’s body transitions from pregnancy to the postnatal period.

Symptoms involve feeling very tearful and emotional. These symptoms normally start approximately two days after birth and may last a few hours or up to several days. You may also experience anxious thoughts, difficulty sleeping, loss of appetite, or irrational worries about motherhood.

It is helpful for you (and your friends and family) to remember that these feelings are usually temporary and will soon pass.

No treatment is necessary for ‘baby blues’ beyond the support of friends and family. However, if your symptoms continue beyond the first week, you may need further help and support.

**How likely am I to experience other difficulties?**
Mental health difficulties during pregnancy and in the months after giving birth can happen to anyone – regardless of background, age, race, life circumstances or past history. In addition, hormonal changes during pregnancy and the postnatal period affect different women in different ways. One person may be able to cope with these changes, whilst another person may find it more challenging.

There is no single cause why women (and men) develop mental health difficulties during this period. Some common contributing factors could be:

- uncertainty about parenthood
- physical complications in pregnancy
- birth events which differ from parent’s expectations
- feelings of disappointment if parenthood is not what you expected
- changes in your relationships and social life
- lack of sleep
- lack of support from friends and/or family
- other significant stressful events (eg loss of job; physical illness; relocation; relationship breakdown; bereavement, etc).
If you have experienced previous mental health problems, or if someone in your family has had mental health difficulties during pregnancy or after giving birth, you may be at increased risk.

**Your baby and you**

In the midst of all the changes and challenges that take place during this period of your life, it is vital to remember that you are the most important person in your baby’s life.

The early days and weeks after birth is an extraordinary time, as both you and your baby recover from the birth process, and gradually develop an understanding of one another.

Even at this very young age, your baby’s future learning, emotions and social development is being shaped by their growing sense of security with you. This sense of security will develop through simple acts of care, such as holding your baby close to you, speaking to your baby, responding to their babbles, and giving your baby time to look at you and get to know you as a parent.

As with any new relationship, there are times when it can be challenging and stressful. This can take more work than you initially thought and there might be times when you feel your relationship with your baby is not turning out the way you expected. It is at these times when you and your baby are most in need of support from a partner, family member, health professional or a support group.

Sometimes, the best form of support is giving you and your baby the space you need to spend quality time with one another, so you can both learn to enjoy this precious period in your lives together.

**What is antenatal depression?**
Depression in pregnancy can occur at any point, feel distressing and is hard to predict. Symptoms may change over a time period of many weeks or they may start suddenly and unexpectedly.

It is estimated that 1 in 7 women will experience persistent symptoms of depression during pregnancy. These symptoms include:
- overwhelming feelings of sadness and hopelessness
- loss of interest or pleasure in doing things you would normally enjoy
- excessive feelings of tiredness and loss of energy
- feeling inadequate and unable to cope with a loss of confidence
- irrational anxiety
- loss of confidence
- significant changes to appetite and sleep
- regular tearfulness
- uncertainty about being pregnant or even suicidal thoughts

Many women feel pressure to be happy during pregnancy and this can result in feelings of confusion and guilt. However, if you are experiencing persistent symptoms or your symptoms are worsening, you should consider seeking help from your GP, midwife or health visitor.
What is postnatal depression?
Approximately 1 in 10 mothers experience postnatal depression.

Postnatal depression is very distressing and hard to predict. Symptoms can start during the first week of giving birth or they may not start until several months later. They may occur gradually or very suddenly.

The symptoms of postnatal depression are similar to those of antenatal depression (see page 4) and this occasionally leads to confused and guilty feelings towards your newborn baby. You may even become fearful of being left alone with your baby.

Women who experience antenatal depression are at increased risk of experiencing postnatal depression, but this is not inevitable. Once again, it is important to remember that this time in your life can be very stressful. It is normal to feel some of these symptoms some of the time. Nevertheless, you should still consider seeking help if you are experiencing persistent symptoms or your symptoms are worsening. Contact your midwife only if you are still under their care, or alternatively your health visitor or GP.

Experiencing anxiety and other mental health difficulties
It is not uncommon for women to experience other forms of mental health difficulties during this period. These can include overwhelming feelings of anxiety, obsessive compulsive tendencies, and problems with eating.

Puerperal psychosis (also called postpartum psychosis) is a severe and rare form of mental illness which occurs in 1-2 in 1000 mothers. Symptoms normally occur within the first week after birth and can involve extreme or bizarre behaviours. This is a medical emergency and requires immediate psychiatric support via your GP, out of hours GP or emergency department.

Women who have a personal or family history of psychosis or bipolar, have a higher risk of puerperal psychosis. If you think you may be at risk, you should meet with your GP to discuss preventative treatment. A partner, family or friends may notice these symptoms first.
**Partners need help too!**

Partners of mothers may also suffer from postnatal depression. Help should be sought from their GP.

Support is also available from the helplines and websites listed at the end of this leaflet.

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**What can we do to help ourselves?**

There is no guaranteed way to prevent mental illness, but there are several things you can do which will decrease your risk:

- Be kind to yourself and realistic
- Do not set yourself too high expectations
- Make time for yourself
- Emotional support from those around you
- Accept practical support
- Get out and about, your baby needs fresh air
- Visit parent and baby groups
- Sleep / exercise / healthy eating
- It’s OK to have a ‘pyjama day’
What professional support and treatment and is available?

Your GP and midwife/health visitor will ask you how you are coping. Use this opportunity to ask for their advice and support. If you find that you are experiencing any mental health difficulties, contact them and arrange an appointment to discuss your symptoms. They will talk through your situation and discuss the different options available:

- **Increased professional visits/support**
- **Local and national support groups and helplines**
- **Counselling or therapy**
- **Medication** (There are national guidelines about which medication is safe to take during pregnancy and breastfeeding).
Useful contacts

**Improving Access to Psychological Therapies Service (IAPTS)**
Surrey Heath Tel: 01483 746900  www.addaction.org.uk

Surrey & Borders Tel: 0300 3305450  www.mindmattersnhs.co.uk/surrey

Berkshire Tel: 0300 365 2000  www.talkingtherapies.berkshire.nhs.uk

Hampshire – Tel: 0238 038 3920  www.italk.org.uk

**Mental Health Crisis Helplines**
Berkshire – Tel: 0300 365 9999
Surrey and North East Hampshire – Tel: 0300 456 8342
NHS - Out of Hours: Tel: 111

**Other Helplines**
Association for Post Natal Illness (APNI) – 0207 386 0868
Open 10am-2pm, Monday-Friday  www.apni.org

PANDAS – Tel: 0843 28 98 401 – local support group in Sandhurst
Open 9am-8pm, 7 days a week  www.pandasfoundation.org.uk

Samaritans – Tel: 08457 90 90 90
Open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week  www.samaritans.org

SANE – Tel: 08457 678 000
Open 6pm-11pm, 7 days a week  www.sane.org.uk

**Useful Webpages**
Action on Postpartum Psychosis  www.app-network.org

Home-Start UK  www.home-start.org.uk

Maternal Mental Health Alliance  www.maternalmentalhealthalliance.org.uk

MIND  www.mind.org.uk

National Childbirth Trust  www.nct.org.uk
Ways to cope: what might appeal to me?

- Talking to someone I trust about how I feel, such as a parent, sibling, partner or trusted friend
- Talking to my midwife or health visitor about how I feel
- Keeping active
- Having a healthy diet
- Finding out about different ways to relax, such as yoga, meditation
- Asking for help with things at home, like chores and babysitting
- Asking or support if I am worried about my baby
- Finding out about how to change my thinking patterns
- Discussing the possibility of counselling or medication with my GP
- Keeping a journal of my feelings through pregnancy and beyond
Remember…

- Feeling emotionally unwell is common. It is nothing to be embarrassed about.

- Talking about it is the best first step in getting the right support.

- It can happen to anyone, whether you have a history of mental illness or not.

- If you have suffered before, it doesn’t mean it will happen again.

- Being prepared can make a big difference.

Notes
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For a translation of this leaflet or for accessing this information in another format:

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Please contact (PALS) the Patient Advice and Liaison Service on:

Frimley Park Hospital
Telephone: 01276 526530
Email: Palsfrimleypark@fhft.nhs.uk

Heatherwood Hospital
Telephone: 01753 633365
Email: Palsheatherwood@fhft.nhs.uk

Wexham Park Hospital
Telephone: 01753 633365
Email: Palswexhampark@fhft.nhs.uk

<table>
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<th>Department</th>
<th>Maternity</th>
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Frimley Health NHS Foundation Trust
Frimley Park Hospital
Portsmouth Road
Frimley
Surrey
GU16 7UJ

Hospital switchboard: 01276 604604

Website: https://www.fhft.nhs.uk/

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