



**Women's Health Research Institute**  
*Putting Women First*

**August 2015**

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Dear Friends,

There is much yet to learn about depression across the female lifespan and the impact of female hormones on mood disorders. Postpartum depression is an example of the profound effect of reproductive events on psychopathology. Indeed, 21.9% of women face depression the year following birth. In general, women have twice the rate of depression as men, and one in five women will have at least one episode of depression in their lifetimes.

This month's e-newsletter provides an overview postpartum depression and its impact on both the parent's and the child's health. A better understanding of depression and mood disorders for new mothers is essential to better care for women who may face these issues.

Sincerely,

The Institute Staff

**Postpartum Depression**



Postpartum depression is a mood disorder that can affect women shortly before or soon after childbirth. While postpartum depression is prevalent in 21.9% of women, recognition and treatment rates are even lower in pregnant and postpartum women (14%) than in the general population (26%). However, treatment for women with postpartum depression is essential since there is mounting evidence that postpartum depression increases the risk for multiple adverse outcomes for women and their offspring. Maternal depression interferes with a child's development and increases the rates of insecure attachment and poor cognitive performance. Postpartum depression can directly impact the lives of mothers, as suicide accounts for about 20% of postpartum deaths.

Childbearing is an opportune time for intervention because women have contact with health care professionals, access to health insurance, and are motivated toward positive behaviors to invest in their offspring's welfare. Women who may be suffering from postpartum depression should be encouraged to seek treatment as soon as possible. Identification of postpartum depression through universal screening has been recommended (and even mandated in some states). The most frequently used postpartum depression screening tool is the Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale (EPDS). The EPDS is a 10-question assessment that is simple to administer to mothers and indicates how the mother has felt during the previous week. While additional tests may be needed for a full diagnosis, this is a simple, effective way to conduct initial screenings for depression among new mothers.

### Symptoms

Family members, friends, clinicians, and mothers should be aware of the symptoms of postpartum depression in order to seek treatment more quickly. Signs and symptoms of depression can vary after childbirth, but there are general symptoms that may be signs of postpartum depression. These include:

- Appetite changes
- Insomnia or sleep disturbances
- Intense irritability and anger
- Overwhelming fatigue
- Loss of interest in sex

- Lack of joy in life
- Feelings of shame, guilt, worthlessness, or inadequacy
- Poor concentration or difficulty making decisions
- Severe mood swings
- Difficulty bonding with one's baby
- Withdrawal from family and friends
- Thoughts of harming one's self or one's baby

If you, or someone you love, is feeling depressed after a baby's birth, it is important to contact your doctor if the symptoms:

- Do not fade after two weeks
- Are getting worse
- Make it hard to care for the baby
- Make it hard to complete everyday tasks
- Include thoughts of harming one's self or one's baby

New research suggests that up to half of women with postpartum depression develop long-term depression. It is therefore incredibly important to monitor for postpartum depression, understand the risk, and accept treatment options.

### Causes

There is no one single cause of postpartum depression, though physical, emotional, and lifestyle factors can play a significant role. After childbirth there is a significant drop in the hormones estrogen and progesterone, which may create a hormonal imbalance, which can contribute to depression. Other hormones produced by the thyroid also may drop dramatically after giving birth, which can leave women feeling tired, sluggish and depressed. Further physical changes that the body undergoes after childbirth, such as changes in blood volume, blood pressure, the immune system, and metabolism also may create a physical imbalance that leads to fatigue and mood swings.



There are also emotional and lifestyle factors to consider when understanding the causes of postpartum depression. Often after giving birth, women are sleep deprived and emotionally overwhelmed. This can lead to anxiety and even depression. Other factors such as a demanding baby, other children to care for, difficulty breast-feeding, financial problems, and a potential lack of support from one's partner or loved ones can also influence a woman's risk of postpartum depression.

If left untreated, postpartum depression can interfere with mother/child bonding and could have developmental implications for the child. Children of mothers with untreated postpartum depression are more likely to have behavioral problems and delays in language development.

### Treatments, Lifestyle, and Home Remedies



One cannot treat postpartum depression on their own, and it is recommended you speak with your doctor to develop an antidepressant, hormone therapy, or counseling regimen to improve your health. Many women have trouble identifying whether or not they are suffering from postpartum depression, which can delay treatment. Antidepressants and psychotherapy are considered the first-line treatments for postpartum depression, though many people worry about transmitting medications to the baby indirectly through breast milk. However, studies show an infant's exposure to antidepressants through breast milk

is very low, and usually non detectable. New treatments of postpartum depression, such as bright light therapy and estradiol skin patches are beginning to emerge.

Beyond medicated treatments and therapies, there are actionable ways you can build an extended treatment plan at home.

- Incorporate healthy lifestyle choices into your daily routine, such as physical activities, eating heartily, and avoiding alcohol.
- Set realistic goals and expectations for yourself and your household. Be sure to ask for help when you need it.
- Make time for yourself.
- Respond positively to negative situations. Often thinking about issues in positive ways can elicit a cognitive behavioral therapy to improve your outlook on unwanted situations.
- Avoid isolation and reach out to family, friends, and support groups. While some time alone is important for recovery, it is equally important to share your feelings with others to help lighten the burden.

### Fathers and Depression

Research is beginning to emerge which suggests fathers can also suffer from moderate to severe depression after the birth of their child. Indeed, this can

happen to 1 in 10 fathers, and is especially high within one year of the child being born. Depression in fathers can have a major impact on personal well-being and functioning effectively as a parent and partner.

Fathers with depression generally experience traditional symptoms of depression including sadness, lack of pleasure in activities, and changes in appetite and sleep. Furthermore, fathers may also have generalized anxiety and obsessive compulsive symptoms pertaining to the child or childcare. Other symptoms, including self-doubt, increased irritability, changed sexual interest, and suicidal thoughts are also observed in fathers suffering from depression.

Men are less likely to seek treatment for depression than women, but it is important to identify the symptoms and administer treatment to improve the welfare of the father and child.



### [Resources for You](#)

The most important combative force against postpartum depression is educating yourself and your loved ones against its risks and symptoms. It is not easy living with postpartum depression, and more research must be done to better understand its causes and most optimal treatments. **[The National Institute of Mental Health recently released a video](#)** outlining patients' testimonies and information outlining the signs and symptoms of postpartum depression. Please share this **[video](#)** with friends and family to spread the word about this important health crisis. Resources are also available to you through **[Northwestern University's Asher Center for the Study and Treatment of Depressive Disorders](#)**.

### [Sources](#)

- [NIH](#)
- [Medicine Net](#)
- [Mayo Clinic](#)
- [Northwestern University's Asher Center for the Study and Treatment of Depressive Disorders](#)
- [WebMD](#)

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## [Institute Happenings](#)

### **Illinois Men's and Women's Health Registries**

The Women's Health Research Institute has launched both the Illinois Women's Health Registry and the Illinois Men's Health Registry to offer opportunities for researchers to expand their knowledge about sex-based

differences in all facets of health. These registries are online databases that record confidential information on women's and men's health and matches willing participants to ongoing research studies and trials. Each registry will aid researchers in preventing disease and improving health conditions in both sexes. Each registry does not focus on any one disease or condition, but rather we invite all individuals to provide information that could help scientists learn more about chronic conditions, lifestyle behaviors and sex differences.

[If you are interested in joining the Illinois Men's Health Registry today, click here!](#)

[If you are interested in joining the Illinois Women's Health Registry today, click here!](#)

### **The Women's Health Science Program Summer Academy**

[The Women's Health Science Program](#) just completed our summer academy introducing 24 young women from Chicago schools to careers in scientific research and medicine. The academy spent a week on the Northwestern Medical School campus learning from scientists, clinicians, graduate students, and medical students. To date, nearly 300 students have participated in the Women's Health Science Program since its inception in 2007. WHSP students have a 100% high school graduation rate, and all of our high school graduates have continued onto college, with 80% actively pursuing science majors. We are so proud of the 2015 WHSP summer academy young women and we cannot wait to see all the success they are bound to accomplish!

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