Postpartum Depression: Recognition, Risks and Effects on the Family

Postpartum depression (PPD) affects up to one in five women in Canada. Although it is the most common mental health problem diagnosed in women, it is often unrecognized and untreated. The symptoms include tiredness, irritability, mood swings, anxiety and trouble thinking. Many people believe the symptoms are a normal part of motherhood. It is important to know the warning signs and risk factors so women get help early on. Untreated PPD affects the whole family and can cause serious long-term problems. There is treatment available for PPD. Nurses, doctors, family and friends help mothers recover. Perhaps you or someone you know might have PPD. What do you need to know?

Mood problems
There are specific symptoms that can indicate a mood problem. Baby blues affect up to 70% of new mothers and occur within 10 days after giving birth. The symptoms include anxiety, mood swings, crying and trouble sleeping. These symptoms usually disappear quickly. Postpartum psychosis is the rarest and most serious mood problem. Out of 1,000 babies born, one or two mothers will experience this. The symptoms are tiredness, sadness, memory problems and confusion. Women who see and hear things that are not real need to be seen in the emergency department. PPD symptoms are the same as depression occurring under any other circumstances. Women may have a depressed mood, no interest in usual activities and changes in sleep patterns and weight. They may have less energy and trouble thinking or making decisions. Some women may feel guilty or have thoughts of suicide. Some women are more at risk for PPD.

Risk factors
There are many risk factors for PPD:
- having a history of depression
- being depressed during pregnancy
- having family members with depression
- having little or no help
- Learning how to be a mother can be stressful. Family may live far away and be unable to help. Some women do not have friends to depend upon.
- having unhappy personal relationships
- The help mothers receive from their partners is important. Some partners do not understand how to help new mothers.
- living on low income
- not having a partner
- having an unplanned pregnancy
- feeling poorly about self

How children are affected
PPD can have serious effects on the family. Children learn how to get along with others from time spent with their mothers. But, mothers with PPD often spend less time playing and talking with their children. Research has shown that children of depressed mothers did not play as well or develop language as well as other children. These children may be described as difficult or shy by their parents. Children of depressed
health clinic. A mental health nurse can offer advice and referral for couples counselling. Treatment with medication is needed by many women. The family doctor or psychiatrist can prescribe antidepressants. If antidepressants are needed, many are safe to use during breastfeeding. Some mothers find behaviour therapy helps them recover from PPD. Friends and family are an important part of helping a mother with PPD. Offering to bring meals or care for older children will be appreciated and will decrease stress. Women with PPD need rest and a healthy diet.

More about PPD
PPD occurs in up to one in five new mothers. Continuing depression symptoms after childbirth is not normal. Untreated PPD causes serious and long-lasting problems for all family members. Nurses, doctors, family and friends can support a woman with PPD towards a successful recovery. Prompt treatment of PPD will keep families healthy.

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