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Perinatai Mental
Health Network

Mental Health In Pregnancy



Visit our website collaborative.nhs.wales/PNMHSupport or scan this QR code for more information and resources.



About this leaflet

This information is written for:

- Any woman who has mental health difficulties during pregnancy
- Any pregnant woman who has had a mental health difficulty in the past and for their partner, family and friends.

It covers:

- Mental health difficulties in pregnancy
- How to stay well during pregnancy and after the birth of your baby
- How to decide whether or not to take medication in pregnancy
- What help and support there is if you are pregnant and have mental health difficulties.

Disclaimer: This leaflet provides information, not advice. For further advice and guidance, please speak to your GP, midwife, health visitor, psychiatrist, psychologist or mental health practitioner.

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How can pregnancy affect my mental health?

Pregnancy is often a very happy and exciting time. But not everyone feels this way. You may have mixed, or even negative, feelings about being pregnant. You may find it more difficult than others to cope with the changes and uncertainties which pregnancy brings. Many things can affect how you feel in pregnancy. These include physical symptoms (e.g. morning sickness), the support you have (or don't have) and stressful events in your life. You may worry about how you will cope with pregnancy or having a baby. It's normal to feel stressed or anxious at times. When you are pregnant, it is common to worry about:

- The changes in your role (becoming a mother, stopping work)
- The changes in your relationships
- Whether you will be a good parent
- Fear that there will be difficulties with the pregnancy or the baby
- Physical health difficulties and pregnancy complications
- Fear of childbirth
- Lack of support and being alone.

As many as one in five women have mental health difficulties in pregnancy or after birth.¹⁻³ It can happen to anyone. Depression and anxiety are the most common mental health difficulties in pregnancy. These affect about 10 to 15 out of every 100 pregnant women.⁴⁻⁵ Just like at other times in life, you can have many different types of mental illness and the severity can vary. You may already have had a mental illness when you became pregnant.

If you have had mental health difficulties in the past, it can be worrying because they can increase the risk of becoming unwell, particularly after birth. However, with the right support this can often be prevented. You can also develop mental health difficulties for the first time in pregnancy or after birth. How your mental health is affected during pregnancy depends on many things.

These include:

- The type of mental illness you have already
- Stopping medication for a mental health difficulty - you have an increased risk of relapse if you do this when you become pregnant. This is more likely if you have had a severe illness⁶⁻⁷, several episodes of illness or a recent episode⁸
- Recent stressful events in your life (such as a death in the family or a relationship ending)
- How you feel about your pregnancy - you may or may not be happy about being pregnant
- Upsetting memories about difficulties in your own childhood.

Symptoms of mental illness in pregnancy are similar to symptoms you have at other times, but some may focus on the pregnancy. For instance, you may have anxious or negative thoughts about your pregnancy or your baby. You may find changes in your weight and shape difficult, particularly if you have or have had an eating disorder.

Sometimes symptoms caused by your pregnancy can be confused with symptoms of mental illness. For example, broken sleep and lack of energy are common in both pregnancy, anxiety and depression.



What if I have had mental health difficulties in the past, but am well now?

You should be referred to a specialist mental health service if you are pregnant and have ever had:⁹

- A serious mental illness, like schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, schizoaffective disorder or severe depression
- Treatment from mental health services
- Postpartum psychosis or severe postnatal depression
- A severe anxiety disorder such as obsessive compulsive disorder
- An eating disorder, such as anorexia or bulimia

It is important to get specialist advice even if you are well during this pregnancy. Women who have had these illnesses have a high risk of becoming unwell after birth. Your midwife or GP can refer you to a specialist perinatal mental

health team. Mental health professionals can discuss care and treatment choices with you. They will help you make a plan for your care with your midwife, obstetrician, health visitor and GP.

If you have had any other mental health difficulties, talk to your GP. Even if you don't need to be referred to a specialist mental health team it helps to get advice and support, so you can stay as well as possible. Often your GP will be able to advise you about care and treatment. This will depend on the illness you have had and how severe it has been.



What treatment is available for mental health difficulties during pregnancy?

It is just as important to have treatment for mental health difficulties as it is for physical health difficulties in pregnancy. The best treatment for you will depend on your illness and how severe it has been. Both psychological therapies (talking treatments) and medication can help.⁹⁻¹⁰

Psychological therapies

A talking treatment may be helpful.⁹ For some this can be used instead of medication. Others may need a talking treatment as well as medication.

Psychological services should see you more quickly if you are pregnant.⁹ Your GP can advise you about referral in your area. You may receive this service through the specialist perinatal mental health service or through your GP.

Primary Mental Health Support Services (PMHSS) offer advice and support for those experiencing common mental health difficulties. There is a range of support available, such as talking therapies, groups or counselling (accessed after a brief assessment). You can access PMHSS by speaking to your GP.



Which professionals and services will I need to see during my pregnancy and how can they support me?

A number of services and professionals offer help and support during pregnancy and early parenthood. They will help you to stay as well as possible and to manage any illness and the recovery process.

Your GP

You should talk to your GP if you are worried about mental health difficulties in pregnancy. Your GP can provide information, advice and treatment. They can refer you to specialist mental health or psychological therapies service if needed.

Maternity services

Your midwife will ask questions about your physical and mental health.⁹ You should tell your midwife if you have or have had mental health difficulties. Your midwife can ensure you get the care and support you need. Your midwife can also tell you about the support available.

Further support is also available through specialist perinatal mental health teams. These are specialist mental health services for pregnant women and women with a baby under one year old. They will work with you, your family, your midwife and health visitor and any other professionals involved.

It is important that you attend your antenatal appointments during pregnancy and have regular contact with your midwifery team. After birth all women and their partners and families will be offered support from the health visiting team, who can provide details of local support and groups. You can find out more about what's available in your area by going to:

www.dewis.wales or

www.en.infoengine.cymru

Community Mental Health Teams (CMHTs) and Specialist Perinatal Mental Health Teams

If you are already under the care of a CMHT, you should tell your psychiatrist or community mental health nurse that you are pregnant. They can tell you about treatment and support available.

Specialist Perinatal Mental Health Teams provide mental health support for women who are pregnant or have a baby up to 12 months old. These teams work together with your CMHTs. Your GP, CMHT, midwife or obstetrician can tell you where you can access this service and how to refer you.

If you are not under the care of a CMHT, but have been in the past, you should talk to your allocated health professional. Even if you are well, you may need the support of a Specialist Perinatal Mental Health Team or CMHT during pregnancy and for a few months after birth. This will depend on the type of illness you have had.

Medication

Many women may need to take medication for different physical and mental health difficulties before, during and after pregnancy. Decisions about whether to continue, change or stop medications in pregnancy are not straightforward or easy. Some medications have been used in pregnancy for many years. A few medications, such as Sodium Valproate (also known as Epilim), are known to cause difficulties in some babies and so should not be used at all in pregnancy.⁹⁻¹¹ In many cases, we simply do not have enough information to be absolutely sure that a treatment is safe. It is important to weigh up the risks and benefits of taking medication in your individual case. Your GP or psychiatrist can help you decide what is best for you and your baby.

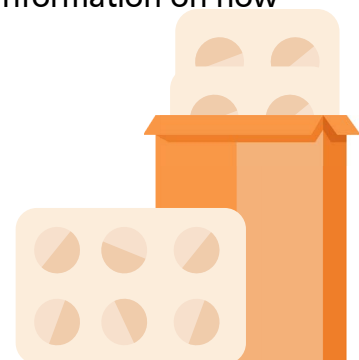
If possible, you should talk to your doctor before you become pregnant. However, sometimes pregnancies are unplanned. This means it's common to have to make decisions about medication when you are already pregnant. In that case, you should see your doctor as soon as possible. It is very important that you don't stop your medication suddenly. Stopping treatment suddenly can make you relapse and can cause unpleasant side-effects.

It may be best for you to continue medication during pregnancy. But - there are many things you need to think about when making decisions about using medication in pregnancy.

These include:

- How unwell you have been in the past
- How quickly you become unwell when you stop medication
- Medications you have taken:
 - which treatments have helped you the most?
 - have some medicines caused side-effects?
- Up-to-date information about the safety of specific medications in pregnancy can be discussed with the Specialist Perinatal Mental Health team.

If you are receiving care from a mental health service, your partner will also be able to receive an assessment. Your allocated health professional can provide you with more information on how to access this support.



If you are unwell during pregnancy:

- You might not take good care of yourself
- You might not attend appointments with your midwife – so you don't get the care you need
- If you use drugs and alcohol, you may use more when unwell. This can harm your unborn baby
- You may need a higher dose of medication if you become ill. Sometimes you may need two or more medications to treat a relapse. This might be more risky for your unborn baby than if you take a standard dose of medication throughout pregnancy
- You may need in-patient treatment
- You may still be unwell when your baby is born. You may then find it more difficult to care for your baby. It may also affect your relationship with your baby
- If your illness is not treated, this may be more harmful for your baby than the effect of medication.

Third sector and voluntary organisations

These offer advice, practical and social support. They host parent and baby groups and drop-in sessions. Ask your midwife and health visiting team for services available in your area or find out more at the end of the leaflet.

Will anyone else be able to help or support me during pregnancy?

Some people have more support than others. Your main support may be your partner, family or friends. It is helpful if the people closest to you know about your mental health difficulties.

If you are at risk of becoming unwell, they should know what symptoms to look out for. They also need to know who to contact for support if they are worried about you. Your partner, family and friends can also help in practical ways - with cooking and cleaning, for instance. Your midwife and health visitor should be able to tell you what is available in your area.



Working together and pre-birth planning meetings:

If you have or have had a severe mental illness, it is helpful to have a meeting to plan your care during pregnancy. This is called a pre-birth planning meeting. It should be organised by the specialist perinatal mental health Team or your community mental health service. It usually happens when you are 30-32 weeks pregnant. You can choose who to bring to this meeting – this may be your partner, a family member or a close friend. All the professionals involved in your care will be invited.

The pre-birth planning meeting helps everyone to understand the care and support you and your family need. It helps everyone identify how to recognise that you are becoming unwell in case this happens. You and your family can tell the professionals about any extra support you need so this can be arranged before your baby is born. You, together with everyone else at the meeting, can agree a plan for your care and treatment during pregnancy, delivery, and for the first few months after birth. This plan will be for you and can include many different things, depending on what you and your family need. It will usually include:

- Your current treatment and any treatment you plan to start after birth, or if you become unwell
- Who will support you at home
- Key professional contact details
- Who to contact if you become unwell
- How to get help quickly
- Who will visit you after your baby is born and how often
- Local parent and baby groups in your area
- This plan will be written down and you will be given a copy. This planning provides reassurance for you and your family, so you know that you have the care and support you need.

What else can I do to maintain my mental wellbeing during pregnancy?

- Eat a healthy, balanced diet
- You should stop drinking alcohol
- Stop smoking (ask your midwife or GP about 'stop smoking' services)
- Find some time each week to do something which you enjoy, improves your mood or helps you to relax
- Meditation or mindfulness – either through a class or an app
- Let family and friends help you with housework, shopping etc
- Exercise (ask your midwife about exercise in pregnancy and local exercise classes)
- Discuss any worries you may have with your family, your midwife or GP
- Get regular sleep
- Make a Wellbeing Plan – this helps you to start thinking about the support you might need in your pregnancy and after the birth. You can download a Wellbeing Plan template from the Tommy's charity website.



Further Information and Support

We have extensive resources on our webpage - visit us at collaborative.nhs.wales/PNMHSsupport or scan this QR code.



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 - Service User involvement: Cocoon Family Support
 - Series Editor: Dr Phil Timms
 - Series Manager: Thomas Kennedy.

Contact Details

Include details for your midwife or health visitor here:

