

Tokophobia Fear of Childbirth



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This information is for anyone who would like to know more about extreme fear of childbirth (tokophobia) or are experiencing uncertainty or anxiety about giving birth.

This leaflet will be helpful if:

- You have or think you might be experiencing severe anxiety and uncertainty about giving birth.
- You are feeling very anxious, uncomfortable, or even repulsed by pregnancy

This leaflet will also be helpful for partners, families and friends who want to know more about tokophobia and how they can support you.

The leaflet covers:

- What is tokophobia
- Why might I have tokophobia?
- How might tokophobia make me feel?
- How can I help myself?
- Can I request a caesarean section?
- What about after the birth?

Disclaimer

This leaflet provides information, not advice. For further advice and guidance please contact your midwife, health visitor, GP, or mental health practitioner.

Acknowledgements

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It has been adapted and adopted with their kind permission for use across the Wales Perinatal Mental Health Network.



What is tokophobia?

Although many women experience some uncertainty or anxiety about giving birth, around 14% of women experience a severe fear of giving birth, known as tokophobia. This leads to high levels of anxiety about birth, even if your desire is to have a child. Some women also feel very anxious and uncomfortable or even repulsed about pregnancy.

Primary tokophobia is when a woman has had no previous experience of birth but nevertheless has a strong fear of childbirth. The feelings of dread associated with childbirth may link to early experiences and can start in adolescence.

Secondary tokophobia is the most common form of tokophobia and occurs in women who have already had a baby. This is where the woman has had a previous traumatic experience of childbirth. It is considered to be a form of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Why might I have tokophobia?

Risk factors and causes include:

- Previous difficult medical/surgical experience
- A previous birth that you experienced as traumatic
- Experience of sexual abuse, assault or rape
- A history of sexual difficulties
- A history of childhood abuse
- A history of mood disorders, anxiety disorders (including PTSD)
- A strong need to be in control
- Hearing, reading, or witnessing experiences of childbirth



How might tokophobia make me feel?

- Distress and heightened anxiety when a pregnancy is confirmed
- Feelings of being out of control and trapped, agitation, irritability, stress, restlessness, and nervousness
- Feelings of isolation, loneliness, being misunderstood and unsupported
- Negative thoughts about being abnormal and different to the people around you, especially those who are pregnant
- Thoughts about having an abortion, even though you might want to have children
- Self-doubt about your ability to go through labour and birth
- Repeated negative thoughts around labour and birth
- Intrusive thoughts and memories (sometimes images) of a previous traumatic birth
- Fear of pain during labour and birth
- Fear of harm or death, as a result of birth (in relation both to yourself and your baby)
- Increasing distress and anxiety throughout the pregnancy, especially in the last trimester
- Symptoms of anxiety, including altered sleep pattern, nightmares, rapid heartbeat, tension, abdominal pains, as well as panic attack symptoms such as difficulty relaxing
- Repeated negative thoughts around labour and birth.



How can I help myself?

The earlier you can get help the better. Below are some suggestions of actions that you might find helpful.

- Speak to your partner, family and friends if you feel comfortable doing so.
- Request additional time from your midwife to discuss any concerns you may have.
- If it is likely you have tokophobia, you should be offered an appointment with a specialist mental health midwife and/or obstetrician.
- Access psychological therapy, such as cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) or eye movement desensitisation reprocessing (EMDR) therapy. This can be particularly helpful for secondary tokophobia, PTSD, or other mental health problems including anxiety and depression. Your GP can refer you to your local primary care mental health service. If you require the specialist perinatal mental health service, your midwife, health visitor, obstetrician or GP can refer you.
- Read **relevant** sources of information – don't rely on information from blogs or internet forums. The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists has a leaflet called '**Choosing to have a Caesarean Section**'. - <https://www.rcog.org.uk/globalassets/documents/patients/patient-information-leaflets/pregnancy/pi-choosing-to-have-a-c-section.pdf>
- Write a detailed birthing plan in partnership with your birth partner and midwife.
- Arrange to visit the labour ward or birthing centre so that you can become familiar with the environment.
- If you are concerned about coping with pain, request an appointment with an anaesthetist to discuss pain relief options.
- Ask about the availability of continuity of care with midwifery. This is where you see the same midwives throughout the pregnancy.
- Take care of yourself with a balanced diet, exercise, relaxation.
- Consider yoga and mindfulness. Ask your midwife for more information about local antenatal classes. There are also useful pregnancy specific mindfulness apps such as Headspace. You can also access mindfulness based courses for free on Melo Cymru - [https://www.melo.cymru/courses/.](https://www.melo.cymru/courses/)

If your tokophobia is severe or complex you will need to be referred to a specialist perinatal mental health service



Can I request a caesarean section?

If you feel strongly that a caesarean section would be the best birth option for you, let your midwife or obstetrician know as soon as possible.

Appropriate support will be offered to address your anxieties, including some of the options discussed above, and maternity services will work together with you to develop a plan for the birth that takes account of both your physical and mental health needs.

Often, the decision about 'mode of birth' will be made in the third trimester (recommended at around 32 weeks). Ultimately, if you feel that a caesarean section is the best choice for you, it must be offered to you.

Partners

Partners can be very helpful in listening to your concerns, helping you to manage your worries and make decisions about the right birth choice for you. If possible, include your partner in birth planning meetings so they are clear on the options available and how best to support you during childbirth.

Some partners may also have worries about your pregnancy and childbirth, especially if they have had traumatic experiences themselves, including a previous traumatic birth. Partners may want to consider accessing help for themselves, for example via their GP so they can resolve past trauma or other mental health problems to be the best support to you and your baby.

What about after the birth?

Many women who experience tokophobia often feel much better after delivery and no longer require mental health support. However, this is not the case for everyone. Sometimes women need to address the issues that led to tokophobia developing. They may need some support to work through their feelings around the delivery or might need some help with their relationship with their baby.

In the first month after the delivery, it is not recommended that you have psychological therapy around your birth experience as your brain needs time to make sense of it on its own. It can however be helpful to have a supportive conversation with a friend, family member or health professional about your experience. If you do need to understand more about your birth experience, you can request an appointment with maternity to discuss your experience and look at your notes. These appointments are sometime called 'birth reflections'.

If postnatally you are struggling with your mental health, please talk to your midwife, health visitor, GP or other mental health professional about how you are feeling, and they can discuss the options of support available to you. If after a month you are still struggling with feelings around your birth experience, then psychological therapy can be considered.

Acknowledgements

Much of this leaflet has been informed by the Pan London Perinatal Networks Fear of Childbirth (Tokophobia) and Traumatic Experience of Childbirth: Best Practice Toolkit¹ and adapted by Dr Sarah Douglass, ABUHB Specialist Perinatal Mental Health Service for the Welsh Context.



Further Information and Support

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



References

1. Mycroft, R & Taha, S (2018). Pan London Perinatal Networks- Fear of Childbirth (tokophobia) and traumatic experience of childbirth: best practice toolkit. www.healthylondon.org/resource/tokophobia-best-practice-toolkit/



Contact Details

Include details for your midwife or health visitor here:

