

Planning a Pregnancy



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We hope it will be helpful if:

- You have a mental health condition and would like to have a baby
- You have had mental health difficulties in the past and want to have a baby
- You are planning a first pregnancy, or already have children and want to get pregnant again

It can also help partners, families and friends who want to find out more about how pregnancy can affect, or be affected by, mental health conditions.

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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Why does it help to plan a pregnancy?

Deciding to have a baby is one of the most important choices any of us can make. If you have a mental health condition particular things to think about - you need good information, advice and support.

It can be hard to know when it's the best time for you to have a baby. Even if you are just thinking about having a baby in the future, it's worth talking to your GP or mental health team. They will be able to give you the information you need to help you decide what to do.

If you have mild to moderate mental health difficulties, your GP will be able to support you with information and guidance.

If your difficulties are more severe, you can be referred to the specialist perinatal mental health team, which is made up of a range of health professionals skilled to support your pregnancy and mental health.

This can include a psychiatrist, who is a doctor who specialises in caring for individuals with mental health difficulties during pregnancy and after birth.

It is best for you and your baby if you can improve your health before you get pregnant.

Planning a pregnancy will give you time to:

Find out about how pregnancy may affect your mental health

Get information about medication in pregnancy

Decide whether you want to change your treatment before you try to get pregnant

Decide which maternity unit/hospital you want to go to

Find out about mental health services for you in your area

Consider what support you will need, especially after birth

Make sure you get support for any physical health difficulties

Get support to stop smoking, drinking or using illegal drugs before you get pregnant

Make sure you are as well as possible before you get pregnant

Getting these things right should help you to plan a healthy pregnancy and birth

Who can I talk to for advice when I am planning a pregnancy?

Your GP is a good person to talk to if you are planning a pregnancy. If you are under the care of a mental health service you should also talk to your mental health team.

Specialist Perinatal Mental Health Teams offer support, guidance and advice for individuals with moderate to severe mental health difficulties. These services are for those who may have an existing or new mental health condition and are planning a pregnancy, pregnant or have a baby up to one year old.

Your GP or psychiatrist can offer you a referral you to this team, if appropriate, so you can see a perinatal psychiatrist for advice when you are planning a pregnancy.

This is particularly important if you have had bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, postpartum psychosis or any other psychotic illness^{1,2}. It may also be helpful if you have had other severe mental health difficulties, such as depression or obsessive compulsive disorder.

You may also find it helpful to talk to other women who have had mental health difficulties and who now have children.

How can I make sure that I have a healthy pregnancy?

To make sure that you are healthy as possible before you are pregnant, you may need to think about your physical health as well as your mental health and wellbeing.

You will have a healthier pregnancy if you:

- Stop smoking
- Stop drinking alcohol
- Stop using illegal drugs and work with other professions as appropriate
- Aim for a healthy weight range through good diet and nutrition and if you are underweight, you may want to get advice and support from a dietician

Other considerations

It is important to take a 400 micrograms tablet of folic acid every day before you are pregnant and until you are 12 weeks pregnant - [NHS 111 Wales - Pregnancy Guide](#)³.

All adults, including pregnant and breastfeeding women, need 10 micrograms of vitamin D each day³ – you should consider taking a supplement containing this amount between September and March - [NHS 111 Wales - Pregnancy Guide](#).

Pregnancy may make your teeth and gums weaker so its recommended that you get early advice from a dentist. These appointments are free during your pregnancy

Speaking to your GP when you are planning a pregnancy can help you get up to date with recommended cervical screening, sexual health checks and vaccinations such as MMR, Rubella, flu and Covid. Your GP can also advise about eating healthily and which foods you should avoid, as well as provide information about any physical health problems such as diabetes or epilepsy.

Should I stop my medication?

Many women worry about taking medication in pregnancy. You need to think carefully about what the risks and benefits of medication are for you and your baby. For many, it may be safer to take medication in pregnancy than to stop. This is more likely if you have had a more severe illness². Deciding whether or not to continue or change your medication is not easy.

If you want to get pregnant, discuss your medication with your psychiatrist or GP. In Wales, your GP or Specialist Perinatal Mental Health Team can offer you an appointment where you can discuss any concerns. They can give you up to date information about medications in pregnancy and help you to decide what is best for you and your baby.

Do not stop your medication or reduce the dose suddenly. You are more likely to become unwell again if you do this without advice.

A few medications, such as Sodium Valproate (also known as Epilim), are known to cause problems in some babies and so should not be used at all in pregnancy¹¹⁻¹³.

Sodium Valproate is a medication used for the treatment of bipolar disorder. Sodium Valproate can harm babies by causing birth defects and developmental difficulties⁴⁻⁷. The risk of harm to an unborn baby from Sodium Valproate is much higher than for other medications used to treat bipolar disorder.

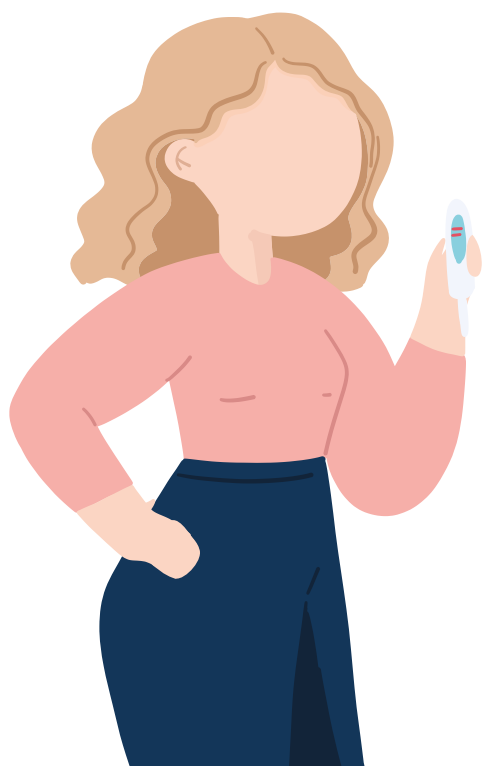
It is very important that you seek advice from a perinatal psychiatrist if you are taking Sodium Valproate and want to plan a pregnancy.

If you have an unplanned pregnancy when you are taking Sodium Valproate you should tell your GP or psychiatrist as soon as possible, so that your medications can be reviewed.

You can decide together what medication would be safest to take for the remainder of your pregnancy. For more information take a look at BUMPS - bumps - best use of medicine in pregnancy (medicinesinpregnancy.org)

Always check whether herbal or over the counter medicines are safe to use in pregnancy.

It is best to use contraception until you have seen your doctor to discuss your medication. If you find you are pregnant, try to see your doctor as soon as possible.



Your doctor and mental health team should support you whether you decide to continue, stop or change your medication.

To decide about using medication in pregnancy, you will need to think about:

- 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 most?
 - Have some medicines caused side-effects?
- Up-to-date information about the safety of certain medications in pregnancy
- What might happen if you are unwell during pregnancy, for example:
 - Finding it difficult to take good care of yourself
 - You might not attend appointments with your midwife, meaning that you may not get the care you need
 - People who use drugs and alcohol may use more when unwell - this can be harmful for 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 riskier 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 using medication.

Will I be able to breastfeed if I am taking medication?

Breastfeeding is good for both you and your baby. You can breastfeed whilst taking many types of psychiatric medication², but you need to talk this over with your doctor. If your baby is unwell or premature the advice may be different. The doctor looking after your baby can help you with this.

Partners can support breastfeeding in several ways. Help and advice for breastfeeding is also available from your midwife, health visitor and local breastfeeding support groups.

You have choices about the best way to feed your baby and your midwife or health visitor can support you to decide what is right for you and your baby.

How may my mental health be affected by pregnancy?

For some women pregnancy may be difficult. Others enjoy pregnancy. Many factors can affect how you feel in pregnancy, including physical symptoms such as morning sickness, the support you have, and stressful events in your life.

Pregnancy does not protect you from having mental health difficulties. Most mental health difficulties are just as common in pregnancy as at other times¹⁻².

For some mental illnesses such as bipolar affective disorder or previous postpartum psychosis, there is a particularly high risk of becoming unwell after having a baby¹⁰. This can happen even if you have been well for many years.

If you plan to get pregnant it is important to tell your GP and midwife if you have ever had a mental illness and about medications that you have used. Your GP or mental health team can give you advice about your risk of becoming unwell in pregnancy or after birth and can tell

you what support is available and what will help to keep you well.

For more information see our leaflets on: Mental Health in Pregnancy, Postnatal Depression, and Perinatal OCD.

What support and help will be available for me in pregnancy?

You will be offered care from a midwife during pregnancy. When you first see your midwife they will ask about your mental and physical health¹.

You should let your midwife know if you have ever had mental health difficulties. They can tell you about the support that will be available for you.

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

After birth, you will be supported by a health visitor who can offer advice and support for you, your partner, your baby and family. There will also be community groups and support available.



Further Information and Support

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



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Contact Details

Include details for your midwife or health visitor here:

