
HEALTH

Tackling the blues...

Post Partum Depression is a serious health issue that is often overlooked, finds SAVIA RAJAGOPAL

Post Partum Depression is a highly under reported condition that affects many women across the world, who've undergone childbirth. 'Post' refers to after, and 'partum' is derived from a Latin word, meaning birth. "During the first week after childbirth, many women (up to 85 per cent) experience a brief period of mood symptoms, including fluctuating mood, tearfulness, irritability and anxiety. About 10–15 per cent of women, however, experience more significant mood symptoms in the postpartum period, called Post Partum Depression (PPD)," explains Dr Shamsah Sonawalla, consultant psychiatrist, Jaslok Hospital.

Signs and symptoms...

While most mothers suffer from being emotionally 'low' after childbirth, extended periods of depression should be looked into. Says Seema Hingorrany, clinical psychologist and psychotherapist, "The depression can begin at any time between delivery and six months post-birth, and may last up to several months or even a year."

In more severe forms, the woman may express suicidal thoughts and may find it difficult to deal with her daily activities, including baby care and may even have thoughts of hurting the baby, adds Dr Sonawalla.

High risks...

There are certain factors that can raise the risk of suffering from PPD. Dr Sonawalla claims that depression or anxiety during pregnancy, history of severe premenstrual syndrome (PMS), previous postpartum depression or mood disorder, lack of or poor social support systems, stressful or negative life events during pregnancy can raise risk of PPD.

Main reasons...

Although the precise cause of PPD is unclear, many scientific studies point that it is linked to the hormonal fluctuations that a woman experiences after childbirth. Elaborates Dr. Firuza Parikh, Director of Assisted Reproduction and Genetics, Jaslok Hospital, "During pregnancy, the levels of the female hormone estrogen and progesterone increase up to tenfold. Within the first 48 hours after delivery, these hormone levels decline dramatically. Research suggests a connection between rapidly declining hormone levels and the appearance of symptoms of PPD. Other hormones such as prolactin (levels of which are lower at the time of delivery but begin to rise sharply in the first week following delivery) and changes in blood levels of cortisol and aldosterone have also been implicated in Post Partum Depression."

Treating it right...

"The first step is medical evaluation by a physician or psychiatrist who is familiar with PPD to rule out presence of other illnesses, such as thyroid disease or anemia," suggests Dr. Parikh. Dr Sonawalla also highlights that counselling and psychotherapy can be important tools to help women identify factors that may be causing depression. Individual or family counselling along with participation in a support group is recommended. However, care should be exercised before putting breast-feeding mothers on medication. Says Hingorrany, "The most commonly

used treatments for depression are antidepressants, psychotherapy or a combination of the two. Which, of these, is the right treatment for an individual, depends on the nature and severity of the case."

Watch out...

Physical symptoms:

Headaches

Numbness

Chest pain

Hyperventilation

Psychological symptoms:

Depressed mood

Irritability and loss of interest in usual activities

Sleep and appetite disturbances

Fatigue

Difficulty in concentrating

Low self-esteem

Feelings of helplessness and hopelessness

Anxiety symptoms such as feeling tense and panicky

FIRST HAND EXPERIENCE...

Pauline Menezes, 36, mother of two adolescent sons I was completely overwhelmed when my first child was born. I used to cry for hours and was completely anti- social. Luckily for me, my family and friends were very supportive and also took an active role in taking care of my child. I didn't like the idea of going through counselling but I realised it had its merits. Motherhood is a learning process and no one is perfect. When I had my second son, I was better prepared and although I went through depression again, I dealt with it better. "

