

# UNDERSTANDING POSTPARTUM DEPRESSION

## IS IT NATURAL FOR A WOMAN TO EXPERIENCE SOME DEGREE OF DEPRESSION FOLLOWING CHILDBIRTH?

Some women will experience varying degrees of depression following childbirth due to physical and hormonal changes, psychological stress and fatigue. A mother's body requires tremendous strength and energy for recovery after birth and she may also endure bouts of loneliness, fear and anxiety over the responsibilities associated with a new child.

## WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF POSTPARTUM DEPRESSION?

Apart from the normal exhaustion and anxiety which naturally accompany a trauma to the body, such as childbirth, a woman may feel extremely sensitive, tense, irritable, lonely, withdrawn, lethargic and incompetent about her role as a woman and mother. In addition, she may have mood swings from feelings of intense happiness to those of intense despair.

## WHAT ARE THE CAUSES OF POSTPARTUM DEPRESSION AND HOW LONG DOES IT TYPICALLY LAST?

Postpartum depression results from the physical and psychological turmoil and upheaval a woman endures during pregnancy and delivery. Usually, the depression that immediately follows birth subsides after four to ten days as the body regains its fluid and mineral balance and adjusts hormonally. However, the exhaustion, tension and apprehension may persist for 6-24 weeks thereafter, with some women reporting an entire year needed before feeling "normal" again.

## CAN POSTPARTUM DEPRESSION BE PREVENTED?

The exhaustion and many of the feelings associated with pregnancy and childbirth are unavoidable, even in the very best of circumstances. Following the birth of a child, a woman needs support and help for at least six to eight weeks. This will allow her time to regain her strength, give quality time to her new baby and psychologically adjust to her new responsibilities.

## WHAT CAN HELP ALLEVIATE THE INTENSITY OF POSTPARTUM STRESS AND DEPRESSION?

- Acknowledge to yourself and to those close to you the amount of stress and hormonal change your body has endured. Some women require at least six months to a year to fully resume their schedules. Allow yourself time to recuperate completely and adjust to the additional complications a new baby brings.
- Ask for help from friends and family for household tasks, meal preparation and childcare. If this is totally impossible to arrange, do the minimum necessary. Wait until later to deal with cleaning, laundry and non-essential chores.
- Rest is CRITICAL for recuperation. Sleep or at least recline and relax whenever your baby is asleep.
- Eat nutritious, well-balanced meals to give your body the fuel needed to regain its strength and to give you the energy required for the care of your family.
- Take a multivitamin and/or iron supplement daily, as prescribed by your physician. If you continue to feel tired despite adequate time, rest and nutrition, report this to your doctor.
- Discuss with your physician what kind and amount of exercise is appropriate for you. Avoid rushing into strenuous routines of any type.
- It takes AT LEAST 6-24 weeks to shed much of the excess weight gained during pregnancy, and sometimes as long as a year to resume your pre-pregnancy appearance. This is NOT the time to despair over weight gain.
- Allow yourself many opportunities to cuddle and comfort your new baby. Not only does this offer him the security he needs, but also allows you time to experience the very special maternal feelings of attachment with your new baby.
- Plan time to be alone to read, relax, or do something you enjoy doing for yourself.
- If there are other children in your home, allow them to sit next to you rather than trying to carry or hold them. Arrange to spend some special time alone with them during the week, assure them of their importance. Also reassure yourself of your ability to handle your family's needs.
- Avoid carrying anything heavier than your new baby during the first weeks after you arrive home.
- Limit the number of errands you have. If you feel you must go out, try to arrange to do so alone.
- After you have had time to recuperate and adjust, resume relationships with your friends and seek support from other new mothers.
- Tell your doctor if postpartum feelings become more intense or extend beyond what you feel is reasonable. Alert him to severe mood swings, eating disturbances, insomnia, obsessive tendencies or other feelings or behaviors that worry you.
- Be aware that if you have previously experienced bouts of depression, premenstrual tension, marital problems, perfectionist drives and/or difficulty coping with stress, that you may very well suffer from serious postpartum reactions. Be aware of the characteristics and be prepared to seek professional assistance as needed.