

## SEEING YOUR DOCTOR

It is not always easy to ask for help, and new mothers may find it especially difficult during this time of change. If you feel that something is wrong, that you are not coping, it is important to seek help as soon as possible. The feelings you are experiencing may be a normal part of the transition to motherhood or you may be experiencing symptoms of antenatal and/or postnatal depression. Sometimes it can be hard to work out the difference, or tempting to blame other things for how you feel.



### WHEN TO SEE YOUR GENERAL PRACTITIONER (GP)

You can see your GP whenever you are worried about your wellbeing or that of your child(ren). It may be that your partner or family are telling you they are concerned about you. If you are not sure how you feel or are hesitant to go to your GP here are some things to think about:

- Have you have been feeling the way you do for more than two weeks?
- Do your feelings make you feel more than mildly distressed?
- Do your feelings make it hard for you to manage the demands of your everyday life?
- Do your feelings interfere with your daily functioning?
- Are your usual strategies for looking after yourself not helping the feelings go away?
- Are you having any scary or risky thoughts or behaviours?

If you have answered yes to any of the above then it is time to see your GP.

This fact sheet is intended to give you suggestions of things to talk to your GP about to make sure you get the best care. Not all of it will be relevant for you. You may consider taking this fact sheet with you to your appointment so you can remember the questions you want to ask.

### The importance of seeing a GP

The factors that contribute to the symptoms of antenatal and postnatal depression must be addressed with a combination of interventions and support. There are many symptoms of antenatal and postnatal depression that need to be assessed and managed in the recovery treatment plan, and seeking quality medical assessment and treatment is usually the first step.

### Finding the right GP

It is important to feel comfortable and confident with your GP. Make sure you see someone who has the knowledge and expertise in antenatal and postnatal depression to assess what is going on, provide information and advise a suitable treatment plan. You have the right to choose your GP and to change from your usual GP if you are not comfortable. It is especially helpful to have an ongoing relationship with your GP to monitor your recovery.

If you would like information regarding GPs that have a special interest in antenatal and postnatal depression contact PANDA for a referral.



## Treatment

### Mental Health Care Plan

Since November 2006 GPs have been able to refer patients to a range of services for mental health care covered by Medicare's Better Access to Mental Health Care (see [www.health.gov.au](http://www.health.gov.au)).

The first step is to develop a Mental Health Care Plan that will detail who you will be referred to for treatment such as a psychiatrist, psychologist or other mental health professional. This involves you and your doctor discussing your medical history, lifestyle and social situation to better understand why you feel the way you do. After completing your Mental Health Care Plan, your doctor should offer you a copy of the plan.

Your doctor will probably ask you to return for a review of your Mental Health Care Plan to ensure you are getting the help you need. If you feel that the mental health treatment is not right for you it's also a good idea to go back to your doctor.

For mild forms of depression and anxiety, your GP may recommend counselling treatments. For moderate to severe depression and anxiety a combination of medications and psychological treatments are important.

Whichever treatment is recommended it is important that you understand what is involved, are comfortable with it and that it has good scientific evidence for its effectiveness. You can ask the following questions:

- What treatment would you recommend?
- What will happen if I don't have any treatment?
- Are there any other ways to treat my condition?
- Is there anything else I can do to help myself?

## Medication

If your GP recommends medication, it is important that you understand both the advantages and disadvantages of this treatment, as well as discuss any concerns you may have. Questions you should consider asking include:

- What is the reason for recommending medication?
- How does this drug work?
- What benefits can I expect from taking it?
- What evidence is available to support this?
- Are there any side effects or risks?
- Will this medication make my symptoms worse initially?
- What if anything should I look for?
- How will this effect my daily functioning?
- How long will I need this medication for?
- How will I know if the medication is working?
- How effective is this medication? How long will it take for me to start feeling better?
- Is there anything I should stop doing or avoid, such as particular foods or drinks?
- Can I continue to breastfeed my baby?
- If pregnant while taking the medication will my baby be harmed?
- What are the risks of becoming dependent on the medication?
- How and when should I stop taking this drug?
- What would happen if I stop suddenly?
- What do I do if I forget to take the medication?
- How will I be monitored on this drug, eg weekly, fortnightly, or monthly?
- What are the alternatives to medication?

If you feel you don't understand:

- ask your GP or Pharmacist for more information
- call the independent medications information helpline in your state
- contact PANDA for details
- refer to PANDA's Postnatal Depression and Medication Fact Sheet.

## Making an appointment

When contacting your GP be clear about what you need when talking to the receptionist. If possible ask for a double appointment so that you have sufficient time to discuss all your concerns with your GP.

Given the demands on many GPs it can be hard to secure an appointment when you want it. In this instance, ask a family member, friend or Maternal and Child Health Nurse to contact the GP on your behalf, or contact PANDA.

## What will your GP do?

Your GP should:

- conduct a thorough assessment of your symptoms, including mental health status, blood tests and physical tests
- provide you with a diagnosis of antenatal or postnatal depression if required
- establish and monitor your treatment plans as part of a Mental Health Care Plan
- refer you to specialist services within your area such as an inpatient mother and baby unit (if required) and services under Medicare's Better Access to Mental Health Care.



## WHAT YOU NEED TO DO WHEN YOU SEE THE GP

Some women who experience antenatal and postnatal depression do not understand what is happening to them or are ashamed of how they feel, leaving out important information necessary for diagnosis. Your GP needs information relating to a variety of physical, emotional and social aspects of how you are coping, to provide an accurate diagnosis and appropriate treatment. Several strategies can assist you when telling your GP all that you are experiencing:

- Take someone else with you to your appointment—your partner, a friend or relative—who can fill in the gaps and recall the information your GP provides.
- Leave your baby and children with a trusted babysitter or take someone with you who can look after them during your appointment.
- Write yourself a note or checklist of things you want to cover or need to say, remembering your worst times.
- Write a note to your GP expressing what you may feel uncomfortable to say face to face. You can leave this with the receptionist who will give it to the GP prior to your appointment.
- Be open and honest with your GP as it is the only way you will receive effective treatment. Your GP will most likely not be surprised by what you disclose.

## Diagnosis

To assist the process of diagnosis it is usually necessary to conduct blood tests and physical tests to rule out physical factors which may influence your symptoms. Pregnancy and delivery can change your body's chemistry, including thyroid, iron and sugar levels. You may wish to ask your GP the following questions:

- What are the tests for?
- Do I need any further tests?
- How and when will I get the results?
- Who do I contact if I don't get the results?

Your GP should ask lots of questions about how you have been feeling to get a full picture of antenatal and postnatal depression symptoms. Your preparation of what you want to tell the GP will help him/her. Make sure you take the time to cover all the issues.

### Counselling

Counselling based treatments are important for recovery. They should always be considered in addition to medication as they provide a non-judgemental environment to express your thoughts and feelings about motherhood and your relationships. Counselling may also help you identify and resolve any problems you are experiencing and develop strategies for coping with antenatal and postnatal depression.

Your GP can refer you to a counsellor in your area. In particular, with a Mental Health Care Plan your GP can refer you to a psychologist or counsellor under the Medicare rebated Better Access to Mental Health Care service, or to other counsellors under the ATAPS Programme.

### Other health care professionals and services available

There are many other services that can provide assistance, support and advice to you. These may include support groups or your maternal and child health nurse. Ask your GP about the services available in your area or contact PANDA.

### Mutual Support

Talking to someone who is experiencing or has experienced antenatal and postnatal depression will provide you with opportunities to share how you feel and discover other coping strategies. Your GP or PANDA's helpline can refer you to a support group in your area.

## Before you leave your appointment

Before leaving your appointment, you may wish to clarify the information you have received by asking the following questions:

- Can I check that I've understood what you've said? What you're saying is...
- Can you explain it again? I still don't understand.
- Can I have a copy of my Mental Health Care Plan or any letters written about me?
- What happens next? Do I come back and see you?
- Who do I contact if things get worse?
- Do you have any written information?
- Where can I go for more information or help? Is there a support group I can join?

You and your needs are important. Don't be afraid to ask questions and discuss your concerns at all times.

## References

- <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Post-natal-depression/Pages/Questions-To-Ask.aspx?url=Pages/What-to-ask.aspx>
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