

# Talking to your doctor

**If you're a new parent or expecting a baby, and you're worried about how you're feeling, talking to your doctor can be a good place to start. Below we provide tips on finding a doctor, sharing your concerns and what to expect from a consultation.**

## It's best to talk about it

It's common to feel a bit worried about sharing your concerns with a health professional. Bear in mind that many people struggle at this time: anxiety or depression affects up to one in five expecting or new mums and one in ten expecting or new dads. It can happen to anyone, and is nothing to be ashamed of. In fact, seeking help when you need it shows that you want the best for yourself and your family. And the earlier you can get the right support, the more likely you are to feel better quickly.

## The doctor's role

There are many different services and health professionals that can help. If you are concerned about yourself or a loved one, a doctor (i.e. a General Practitioner or GP) is often a good place to start. They should be able to give you non-judgemental support, assessment, diagnosis, and ongoing care and treatment. They can also refer you to specialists e.g. a counsellor or psychiatrist.

## Finding the right doctor

Do you have a regular doctor with whom you can share your concerns? If not, it's worth looking for a doctor with a special interest in mental health. Ask family and friends for recommendations of doctors who understand mental health, or ring local practices and ask about their doctors. We can help: call the PANDA National Perinatal Anxiety & Depression Helpline on 1300 726 306 and we will help you to find a doctor in your area.

## Making an appointment

Request a double appointment and let them know it's about a possible mental health issue. Consider asking for an urgent appointment or cancellation. Mental health issues can be serious, and symptoms can change quickly (see below).

Ask for an interpreter if you need one. Many people prefer to talk about sensitive issues in their first language, even if they speak some English.

## Consider taking someone

Consider taking a trusted person with you. A common symptom is difficulty taking in or remembering information. A trusted person can take notes, and might also help you to feel more confident about sharing your concerns.

## If you feel worse

If you need urgent help before your appointment, call triple zero (000) or go to a hospital emergency department.

You can call the **PANDA National Perinatal Anxiety & Depression Helpline** for support and ongoing counselling on 1300 726 306, Monday to Friday, 9am to 7.30pm AEST/ADST. You can call about yourself or someone else.

If you need someone to talk with outside PANDA's hours, call Suicide Call Back Service on 1300 659 467, Suicide Line on 1300 651 251, or Lifeline on 131114.

## Prepare for the appointment

People often forget things that they wanted to tell or ask their doctor during their appointment. It can be helpful to prepare by writing a list of your symptoms, concerns, and questions.

### Use our Checklist as a tool

The PANDA website has a set of Checklists that can help you better understand what you or your loved one may be feeling. You have the option to print or email yourself your Checklist responses. You can then share this information with your doctor.

### Practice the conversation first

If you're still not sure about sharing your concerns with your doctor, it can help to talk with a loved one or friend first. You can also call PANDA. Our counsellors are skilled at helping you to explore your feelings, and to practice aloud the things you want to tell your doctor.

## What to tell your doctor

It's important to tell your doctor about any changes in your thoughts, feelings and behaviours since becoming an expecting or new parent. Let the doctor know if you have felt this way and/or been diagnosed with depression, anxiety or another mental health condition before. It's also important to tell them if you have had previous thoughts of suicide, or if you have lost someone to suicide.

### What to expect

Your doctor should be non-judgemental, respectful and supportive.

They should assess you by asking questions about your symptoms, your and your family's mental health history, your physical health and lifestyle (e.g. exercise, sleep, use of alcohol or drugs), your living situation,

major emotional or psychological experiences, and treatment preferences.

After assessment, your doctor should be able to provide a diagnosis and treatment plan, although sometimes more tests are needed before a diagnosis can be made. They should explain your treatment options, and why they are referring you to any specialist services.

## Questions to ask

You have the right to fully understand your diagnosis and recommended treatment. You could ask:

- What are my options for treatment? Which do you think are best for me? What are possible side effects of any medications?
- How much better might I feel, and how soon?
- Who are you referring me to? What do they do? How much will it cost? If I have private health insurance, will it be covered? (check your policy)
- Are there other ways that I can care for myself?
- Can you talk with my other health care providers about shared care? (e.g. obstetrician, midwife, MCH/Child and Family Health Nurse).

Your doctor can refer you to services like counsellors, psychologists and psychiatrists. They might give you a mental health care plan, which gives you some Medicare rebates for counselling. For a higher level of care, they might refer you to a Mother Baby Unit — a hospital unit where you stay with your baby — or to another hospital-based psychiatric service.

## If you don't get what you need

Not all doctors have the same experience or qualifications in supporting patients with potential mental health issues. If the first doctor you see doesn't help you enough, please don't give up. You have a right to the support you need, to feel better and enjoy your parenting journey.

Call the PANDA National Helpline any time: to find a doctor, for supportive counselling, or to discuss other support options like playgroups or support groups. You can call for yourself or about someone you are concerned about.

