How Does Depression Affect Expecting Mothers?

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Linking Depression and Pregnancy

Anyone may experience depression at some point during their lives, including during pregnancy. Although postpartum depression may be more widely recognized or talked about, there are also many women who experience depression during pregnancy.

Depression is not only something that can affect you after giving birth. As a pregnant woman, it is important to recognize any potential warning signs. Keep on reading to learn more about depression and pregnancy, and ways to cope.

Understanding Depression

Depression is a mood disorder that is best understood as causing feelings of sadness and hopelessness. These feelings are more persistent than normal bouts of sadness and can have a profound impact on your life.

When you are affected by depression, the thoughts and feelings that you experience affect everything – from how you think and act, to how you eat and sleep. Some women who have never before experienced depression will show signs when pregnant.

Other women, who may have battled depression in the past, will relapse during pregnancy. The hormonal shifts that women experience during pregnancy can trigger the onset of depression.

While some women will experience depression during pregnancy, there are others who experience the first signs of postpartum depression during this time. Research suggests that between 14 to 23 percent of all pregnant women experience depression during pregnancy.

Depression itself occurs twice as often in women than men, and most women experience initial onset at some point during their reproductive years. This is why it is important to know and look out for symptoms of depression in yourself, as well as in other women during pregnancy.

Signs and Symptoms of Depression

Many signs of depression pertain to the general population, including:

- Persistent feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness or guilt.
- Loss of interest in previously enjoyable activities or hobbies.
- Decreased sex drive or impotence.
- Feelings of fatigue or insomnia.
- Chronic anxiety, restlessness, or tension.
- Increased or decreased appetite.

- Weight gain or weight loss.
- Mood swings and inability to control emotions.
- Thoughts of death and suicide.

Although these symptoms can be felt by anyone struggling with depression, there are other symptoms of depression that specifically affect pregnant women. These may include:

- Excessive worry/anxiety about your baby.
- Poor adherence to prenatal care.
- Smoking, drinking, or doing drugs while pregnant.
- Low self-esteem, including feelings of inadequacy surrounding motherhood.
- Poor appetite and poor weight gain, despite pregnancy.

If you have experienced some of these symptoms, speak to your doctor about screening for depression at least once during your pregnancy. Feeling this way is difficult at any time, but it can be especially difficult to cope with these feelings during pregnancy.

How Pregnancy Changes Your Body

While pregnant, chances are that you are experiencing new symptoms on a near-daily basis. Most women report changes in sleep, energy level, appetite and libido during pregnancy.

Unfortunately, all of these symptoms that are common during pregnancy are also common in depression. As a result of these overlapping symptoms, depression can go overlooked in many pregnant women.

First-time mothers who are unfamiliar with pregnancy often brush off symptoms of depression, even if these symptoms are drastically affecting their daily lives. Do not assume that what you are feeling is normal.

You should not be crying all the time, nor should you struggle to maintain your job or relationships while pregnant. Do not let shame or guilt hold you back from seeking professional help.

If you are experiencing any changes related to mood during your pregnancy, it is important to discuss this with your doctor. If these feelings are persistent, your doctor may be able to diagnose you with depression, prior to the birth of your baby.

Risk Factors for Depression During Pregnancy

If any of the following pertain to your life, you may be at risk of depression:

- Anxiety.
- History of depression.
- Stress.
- Unintended or unwanted pregnancy.
- Intimate partner violence.
- Poor social support.

Easing Depression Symptoms While Pregnant

It is highly unlikely that depression will go away without treatment, but many women are hesitant to take anti-depressants or other medications while pregnant.

The truth is, certain antidepressants – including selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) are perfectly safe to take during pregnancy. Both medication and psychotherapy are proven ways to treat depression during pregnancy.

Most doctors will attempt to keep pregnant women off of medications of any kind at first, but if therapy is not working for you, there is no harm in taking anti-depressants. If your symptoms are severe, medication may be your only viable option.

Deciding not to pursue treatment is even more dangerous, as untreated depression can lead to complications like a mother not eating, and failing to gain weight or provide her baby with the appropriate nutrients.

Chances are, if you have experienced depression during pregnancy, those thoughts and feelings will not disappear once your baby is born. More often than not, feelings of depression actually begin to compound.

Above all else, it is important to ensure that you are getting adequate sleep, eating well and exercising throughout pregnancy to improve or maintain your mental health.

The Effect of Depression on a Baby

If you refuse to seek help for depression during pregnancy, it can affect your ability to connect with your baby once born.

Those with severe depression often feel disconnected from themselves, making it nearly impossible to connect with someone else. If you are having difficulty feeling a connection between you and your baby after birth, you may be experiencing post-partum depression.

You Deserve Help

Many women are reluctant to admit feelings of depression, as pregnancy is often classified as a joyous time in a woman’s life.

Depression during pregnancy is surprisingly common, with about 1 in 10 women reporting symptoms. Chances are, this number is even higher since so few women are willing to admit it.

Do not hesitate to ask for help. Your emotional health is just as important as your physical health as a soon-to-be mother, and your baby deserves you at your best.