



Information for Patients & Caregivers

What you Need to Know About Mental
Health Disorders in Pregnancy and Birth?

Valid From: 3rd March 2020

Date of Next Revision: 3rd March 2022

It is estimated that nearly 1 in 6 women in Qatar suffer from depression after childbirth.

Pregnancy and birth can be an exciting time, but it is not uncommon for some women to feel more anxious and 'down' during this time. Some may go on to develop mental health problems during the pregnancy or after the birth of their baby.

Pregnancy may also worsen any pre-existing mental health issues.

+ WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH?

Mental health relates to your emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how you think, feel and behave.

It is normal for people to worry about things from time to time, but some people get more anxious than others.

+ WHAT IS MENTAL ILLNESS?

Mental illness is a condition that affects a person's thinking, feeling or mood. It includes difficulty with handling stress, relating to others, and making healthy choices for yourself.

+ WHAT CAUSES MENTAL ILLNESS IN PREGNANCY AND BIRTH?

Factors that may increase the risk of mental health disorders in pregnancy and birth include:

- Family and domestic violence.
- Living alone or lack of family/social supports.
- Marital discord
- Traumatic birth experience.
- Unwanted or unplanned pregnancy.
- Pregnancy with twins/triplets.
- Family history of mental illness.
- Stopping medication for an existing mental health problem.
- Miscarriages or neonatal death.

+ WHAT SYMPTOMS TO LOOK OUT FOR?

Maternal mental health symptoms can range from having low moods, feeling anxious and depressed, to psychosis.

Depression is common, symptoms include:

- Depressed or hopelessness.
- Loss of interest in daily activities.

Anxiety is also common, symptoms include:

- Feeling nervous, anxious or on edge.
- Not being able to sleep or control worry.
- Avoiding places or activities leading to uncomfortable situations.

Less common are other Mental disorders such as **Psychosis**, symptoms include:

- Delusions.
- Hallucinations
- Disorganised thinking

Very rarely some women may develop **Tokophobia** which occurs when a woman has an extreme fear or dread of childbirth.

+ WHEN TO SEE A DOCTOR?

If you are planning a pregnancy, are pregnant or have recently given birth and have the symptoms above for the first time and are concerned about your mental health.

If you have already been diagnosed with a serious mental illness such as:

- Schizophrenia, bipolar disorder or severe depression.
- Postpartum psychosis or severe postnatal depression.
- A severe anxiety disorder such as Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder.
- An eating disorder, such as anorexia or bulimia.
- Other mental illness.

Consult a doctor if you are unsure about taking your mental health medication due to concerns about its potential effects on your health or your baby's health.



IMPORTANT:

Talk to your doctor if you have recently started or stopped taking a medication because of your pregnancy and have any of these symptoms.

+ WHAT YOUR DOCTOR WILL DO?

Your doctor will ask about your pregnancy and mental health history including symptoms, their durations, previous pregnancies if any and whether you have a personal or family history of any mental illness.

Your doctor will examine your body, check your foetus and may order some laboratory tests if necessary.

If mental illness is confirmed, your doctor will discuss the available treatment options with you and their potential side-effects on pregnancy and breast feeding. The doctor will provide advice on any lifestyle changes you need to make.

In some cases, you may be referred to a mental health specialist for further treatment.



+ LIFESTYLE ADVICE

- Do not keep to yourself. Spend time with people who make you feel relaxed and good about yourself.
- Talk to people you trust about your feelings. This will make it easier for you to talk to your doctor.
- Stay physically active but check with your doctor or midwife before you start an exercise program.
- Exercise releases endorphins into your body, which are natural antidepressants.
- Maintain a healthy sleep schedule

GOOD SLEEP HYGIENE RULES:

- Sleep at night.
- Minimize naps.
- Avoid excessive light at night.
- Develop a bedtime routine.
- Make sure that the sleep environment is pleasant.

+ SPECIALIST CARE

The Specialist team will talk to you in detail about the problems you have been experiencing such as changes in behaviour and mood and how it affects your ability to care for yourself and your baby, and to carry out daily tasks.

They may request foetal scans and monitoring, and if needed specialist maternal-foetal medical support.

The Specialist team will also obtain your consent to talk to your family about your symptoms.



+ MEDICATIONS USED FOR TREATMENT

Psychological interventions are the preferred treatment options before, during and after pregnancy but if needed medicines for mental illness include:

- **Antidepressants**
It may take a few weeks for you to start feeling the effects of an antidepressant. Be patient and allow enough time.
- **Benzodiazepines**
These are not recommended for pregnant women but may be prescribed for short-term treatment of severe anxiety and agitation.
- **Antipsychotics and Mood Stabilisers**
These are not commonly prescribed medications. They are prescribed only by a psychiatrist if you have severe mental illness and have not responded to other treatments.

Your doctor will consider the benefits and risks of these treatments on you or your child before recommending their use.

+ IMPORTANT TIPS:

- Eat a healthy, balanced diet including fresh fruits and vegetables.
- Practice relaxation techniques like meditation or mindfulness
- Keep doing things you enjoy. This keeps you positive.
- Discuss any worries you may have with your family or your doctor.
- Stop smoking (ask your doctor about 'stop smoking' services)
- Let family and friends help you with housework and shopping.



NOTE:

All medications have potential side effects but not everyone gets them. If you experience any side effects, please consult your doctor. All medications are best avoided in pregnancy. Your doctor can recommend a treatment which is relatively safe in pregnancy.

+ ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Additional information on diagnosis and management of Obstetric Mental Health Disorders can be found in the National Clinical Guideline published by The Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) Qatar.

The guideline is available to the public from the MoPH website: www.moph.gov.qa