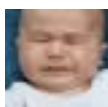


Beating the baby blues

For many mums the thrill of having a baby can be followed by despair. Dr Dawn Harper explains more about postnatal depression



At the postnatal mother and baby group

all the mums look busy and chatty and in the park the ones pushing prams look relaxed and happy. But you feel terrible – down, tearful, isolated and sad. What's going on?

First of all, your feelings are common. Almost two-thirds of mums experience the 'baby blues' a few days after the birth, caused by hormonal changes. For a few days, you'll feel gloomy, irritable and will probably cry a lot. Postnatal depression (PND) is different. First, it can start anything up to six months after the birth.

And as well as feeling depressed, PND can leave you with no appetite, sleep problems, constant irritability, anxiety and feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness and guilt. Between one in seven and one in 10 mums experience PND.

POSSIBLE TRIGGERS

Certain things can make it more likely, including a previous episode of depression or family history of depression, poor support from friends and family, relationship difficulties or any major stressful life event. Having an unwanted or sick baby or having lost your own mother in childhood can also be

triggers. Single mums may be more susceptible too because they have more responsibility to bear and tend to be more isolated.

SIGNS AND STRATEGIES

If postnatal depression does strike, it's important to react quickly. Early warning signs include feeling constantly anxious about the health and wellbeing of your baby and believing that you can't cope. If you feel like this, speak to your health visitor or GP.

In my experience, the two big stumbling blocks to asking for help are a fear that you will have to take medication and a fear that your baby will be taken away. In fact, only a minority of sufferers are prescribed pills; most will have a 'talking treatment' such as cognitive behavioural therapy, which can be very effective. As to being separated from your baby, in 12 years of general practice I've never had to recommend that action.

The good news is that most episodes of postnatal depression get better of their own accord within three to six months. But one in four sufferers who don't take action are still unwell on their child's first birthday – don't let that be you. ■