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Sue Ann Says: Take Care of Your Mental Health Before, During and After Pregnancy

Thinking back to when I was having my babies in the early 1970s, I remember other new moms who seemed sad and depressed. Yet, what was probably baby blues or postpartum depression wasn't something we talked about and it certainly wasn't addressed in the general public.

Fortunately, times have changed. We now know that baby blues and postpartum depression are real and recognized as mental health issues needing attention.

Eighty percent of new moms experience the "baby blues" after pregnancy, which means that women can feel agitated, moody, or sad for a short time. But for some new moms, postpartum depression occurs with symptoms that are far more serious and long-lasting. Postpartum depression and other mental health issues are fairly common, affecting 10-20% of new mothers.

And now a recent study by the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health found that more than 50 percent of women with postpartum depression have a *history* of poor mental health—a finding that can help women and their health providers be on the alert for warning signs to avoid the progression of mental health issues during and after pregnancy.

Address Mental Health Issues During if Not before Pregnancy

Poor mental health before and during pregnancy is a giant red flag for mental health problems after the baby is born. I had the chance to talk with Dr. Whitney Witt, lead author of the UW-Madison study. She explained that women who have mental health problems during pregnancy

are 11 times more likely to have similar problems after pregnancy. “What we have is a domino effect,” says Witt. “The best way to stop poor mental health in this progression is to make certain that women before pregnancy are in the best mental health possible, which in turn, can promote good mental health throughout pregnancy and afterward.” The best way you can do this is by talking with your health care provider.

Risk Factors

It’s important to know if you are at a greater risk for developing mental health problems after pregnancy. Besides having earlier mental health issues (which is one of the greatest risk factors), women in poor physical health, women who’ve had pregnancy complications, women with less than a high school degree, and women from certain ethnic groups, like Asian/Pacific Islanders were found to report more instances of postpartum depression and other mental health issues, according to Dr. Witt’s study. Other risk factors may include having a weak social support system, having financial problems, or having an unwanted or unplanned pregnancy.

What You Can Do:

- **Tell your doctor if you have a history of depression**, especially postpartum depression, as soon as you know you are pregnant. Your doctor will observe you for signs of depression during your pregnancy and afterwards, and s/he might ask you to come in for an early postpartum check-up. If you are feeling symptoms of depression during pregnancy, let your doctor know so that you can get the help you need before your baby is born.
- **Take care of your own health.** Take time to rest and get exercise regularly before and after pregnancy. Schedule walks with your baby into your day. Do what you can to stay off or limit use of tobacco and alcohol—both of these habits can increase your risk. Eat nutritious foods.

- **Stay connected to your friends and family.** Be honest with them about how you are adjusting to the pregnancy or new baby. Don't be afraid to talk about feelings of sadness, guilt, or being overwhelmed—these are common. Ask your friends and family for support during this time.
- **Recognize the symptoms:** Symptoms of postpartum depression include sleeping problems, loss of pleasure, prolonged feelings of sadness, guilt and being overwhelmed, trouble concentrating, irritability, appetite changes, headaches, stomachaches, and even thoughts of harming yourself or your baby.
- **Don't be afraid to ask for help.** Mental health problems are the same as any other health problem such as diabetes or heart disease. If you are experiencing symptoms of depression lasting a couple of weeks or longer, talk to somebody you can trust and see a professional healthcare provider right away.

All children deserve the chance to have a healthy mom. And all moms deserve the chance to enjoy their life and their children. If you have a history of depression, do what you can to it before becoming pregnant. If you are feeling depressed during pregnancy or after having a baby, please tell a loved one and call your doctor right away.

Because it all begins with a healthy woman...

Sue Ann Thompson is founder and president of the Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation (WWHF), a statewide non-profit organization whose mission is to help Wisconsin women and their families reach their healthiest potential. WWHF provides programs and conducts forums that focus on education, prevention, and early detection; connects individuals to health resources; produces and distributes the most up-to-date health education and resource materials; and, awards grants and scholarships to women health researchers and related community non-profits. To learn more, visit wwhf.org or call 1-800-448-5148.

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- If you are having immediate thoughts about harming yourself or your baby, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at **1-800-273-TALK**.
- Call the Postpartum Depression Hotline at **1-800-PPD-MOMS** (1-800-773-6667)
- For a list of resources by county, visit the WI Department of Health Services at www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/MH_BCMH/WomenResources.htm.
- Visit Wisconsin United for Mental Health at www.wimentalhealth.org.