

Breastfeeding & Antidepressant Medication Use

This pamphlet is designed to answer some questions you may have about postnatal depression and how it can be treated.

It will give you information to help you decide about using antidepressant medications while you are breastfeeding.

Produced by Division of Mental Health
St George Hospital and Community Health Services
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Where can I get more information or advice?

If you have concerns about experiencing postnatal depression, the use of antidepressant medication while breastfeeding or side-effects of antidepressant medication you can discuss these concerns with:

- Your family doctor
- Your psychiatrist
- Child and Family Nurses at the Early Childhood Centre
- The Mothersafe Hotline (Royal Hospital for Women)
(02) 9382 6111
(02) 9382 6539

You can also get information on the internet on sites such as:

- www.motherisk.org
- www.beyondblue.org.au

What is postnatal depression?

Postnatal depression refers to depression occurring in the months following childbirth. It is the feelings of sadness or hopelessness lasting several weeks and happening along with other signs such as tearfulness, anxiety, panic attacks, feeling irritable, being unable to cope, loss of enjoyment, poor appetite and/or sleep problems. When severe, it can also be accompanied by frightening thoughts of harming oneself or one's baby.

The birth of a child is a joyful event but it is often one of life's biggest challenges for a woman and her family. Women are more likely to develop emotional problems, particularly anxiety and depression, following childbirth than at any other time in their lives. Postnatal depression is common and affects up to 1 in 7 women.

What treatments are available?

Postnatal depression is a very real illness which needs to be treated. Treatments include increased social support, counselling and antidepressant medication. Counselling can be a very effective treatment on its own or together with medication. When depression lasts for several weeks or is severe enough to affect the woman's sleep, her appetite or her ability to care for her baby and other children, medication is usually necessary to treat it.

Antidepressant medications are very effective for treating depression and most women can expect improvement in their mood, sleep, appetite and interest in life within 2 to 3 weeks of starting antidepressant medications.

Are antidepressants safe to use while breastfeeding?

We do not currently have enough information to answer this question fully. The information we do have comes from research following up women who have been treated with antidepressants while breastfeeding and finding out if there were side-effects or consequences from taking the medication for these women or their babies.

All antidepressants are passed in very low amounts from the breastfeeding mother to her baby. Full-term, healthy babies can usually cope well with this. Very occasionally babies may experience side-effects from the medication but these usually disappear once the medication is changed or stopped.

The choice of antidepressants will depend on the woman's individual response to the medication. A person may respond well to one antidepressant and not another. If the first medication doesn't work well or if the side-effects are difficult to cope with, there are other medications that can be tried.

There are many types of antidepressants but, in breastfeeding women, there are two main types that have been used more often: Tricyclic antidepressants (TCAs) and Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs). TCAs have been available for over forty years and more is known about their safety. They promote sleep and relieve anxiety. They can cause dizziness when standing up quickly so women need to be aware of this and be careful especially when getting out of bed at night. They can also cause constipation, dry mouth and increased appetite.

SSRIs have been in use for over ten years. They are generally well tolerated. More common side-effects include headaches, nausea, diarrhoea, agitation or sleep problems.

Many of the side-effects of these medications will settle within a few weeks.