Perinatal Depression

When a woman feels excessive sadness, anger, or anxiety during pregnancy or during the first 12 months after she gives birth, she has a condition called perinatal depression. Depression can interfere with work, school, relationships, and other everyday activities. If it is not managed properly, it can also cause problems in the mother and her baby.

Sometimes, perinatal depression is left untreated because symptoms are thought to be normal mood swings during and right after pregnancy. If you have symptoms of depression, it is important to talk with your health care provider.

What are the causes?
The exact cause of this condition is not known. Hormonal changes during and after pregnancy may play a role in causing perinatal depression.

What increases the risk?
You are more likely to develop this condition if:

- You have a personal or family history of depression, anxiety, or mood disorders.
- You experience a stressful life event during pregnancy, such as the death of a loved one.
- You have a lot of regular life stress.
- You do not have support from family members or loved ones, or you are in an abusive relationship.

What are the signs or symptoms?
Symptoms of this condition include:

- Feeling sad or hopeless.
- Feelings of guilt.
- Feeling irritable or overwhelmed.
- Changes in your appetite.
- Lack of energy or motivation.
- Sleep problems.
- Difficulty concentrating or completing tasks.
- Loss of interest in hobbies or relationships.
- Headaches or stomach problems that do not go away.

How is this diagnosed?
This condition is diagnosed based on a physical exam and mental evaluation. In some cases, your health care provider may use a depression screening tool. These tools include a list of questions that can help a health care provider diagnose depression. Your health care provider may refer you to a mental health expert who specializes in depression.

How is this treated?
This condition may be treated with:

- Medicines. Your health care provider will only give you medicines that have been proven safe for pregnancy and breastfeeding.
- Talk therapy with a mental health professional to help change your patterns of thinking (cognitive behavioral therapy).
- Support groups.
• Brain stimulation or light therapies.
• Stress reduction therapies, such as mindfulness.

Follow these instructions at home:

Lifestyle
• Do not use any products that contain nicotine or tobacco, such as cigarettes and e-cigarettes. If you need help quitting, ask your health care provider.
• Do not use alcohol when you are pregnant. After your baby is born, limit alcohol intake to no more than 1 drink a day. One drink equals 12 oz of beer, 5 oz of wine, or 1½ oz of hard liquor.
• Consider joining a support group for new mothers. Ask your health care provider for recommendations.
• Take good care of yourself. Make sure you:
  ◦ Get plenty of sleep. If you are having trouble sleeping, talk with your health care provider.
  ◦ Eat a healthy diet. This includes plenty of fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and lean proteins.
  ◦ Exercise regularly, as told by your health care provider. Ask your health care provider what exercises are safe for you.

General instructions
• Take over-the-counter and prescription medicines only as told by your health care provider.
• Talk with your partner or family members about your feelings during pregnancy. Share any concerns or anxieties that you may have.
• Ask for help with tasks or chores when you need it. Ask friends and family members to provide meals, watch your children, or help with cleaning.
• Keep all follow-up visits as told by your health care provider. This is important.

Contact a health care provider if:
• You (or people close to you) notice that you have any symptoms of depression.
• You have depression and your symptoms get worse.
• You experience side effects from medicines, such as nausea or sleep problems.

Get help right away if:
• You feel like hurting yourself, your baby, or someone else.
If you ever feel like you may hurt yourself or others, or have thoughts about taking your own life, get help right away. You can go to your nearest emergency department or call:
• Your local emergency services (911 in the U.S.).
• A suicide crisis helpline, such as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255. This is open 24 hours a day.

Summary
• Perinatal depression is when a woman feels excessive sadness, anger, or anxiety during pregnancy or during the first 12 months after she gives birth.
• If perinatal depression is not treated, it can lead to health problems for the mother and her baby.
• This condition is treated with medicines, talk therapy, stress reduction therapies, or a combination of two or more treatments.
• Talk with your partner or family members about your feelings. Do not be afraid to ask for help.

This information is not intended to replace advice given to you by your health care provider. Make sure you discuss any questions you have with your health care provider.