

Postnatal depression: NHS is failing new mothers, say researchers

Doctors are prescribing antidepressants rather than providing counselling and other treatments

- [Comments \(37\)](#)
- [Tracy McVeigh](#)
- [guardian.co.uk](#), Saturday 1 October 2011 20.13 BST
- [Article history](#)



Gwyneth Paltrow has suffered from postnatal depression. Photograph: Startraks Photo / Rex Features

Mothers with postnatal [depression](#) are being failed by the National Health Service, which is ignoring international guidelines on the condition.

Researchers from the charity [4Children](#) surveyed all health trusts in England and Wales to find out what sort of treatment was being received by the one in 10 new mothers who suffers from the condition. They found that, of those whose symptoms were recognised at all by their GPs, the vast majority were being prescribed antidepressants, against guidance from the National Institute for Clinical Excellence, which recommends "talking therapies" – counselling and cognitive behavioural treatments – for mild and moderate cases of the so-called "baby blues".

The survey, by parenting club Bounty on behalf of 4Children, also found that few health authorities were collecting information on the prevalence or severity of [postnatal depression](#), while others seemed to have only a patchy understanding of the issue.

There were vast disparities between those who did hold information – two primary care trusts claimed they had had only one case in the past year, while another reported 1,350 cases. Only 9% of health trusts were keeping track of the condition in their area.

"That's pretty unlikely given the one in 10 figure that is widely accepted for postnatal depression," said Anne Longfield, chief executive of 4Children. "This is not a rare condition. You'd think it might have rung an alarm bell with them, but what is perhaps more astonishing is that the Department of Health holds no statistics at all."

Longfield said that the results of the report were shocking and showed that postnatal depression was not being taken seriously: "It just reveals so much in terms of lack of empathy and sympathy for these people. It's a complete disregard for their health and wellbeing.

"It seems that, from the Department of Health's point of view, it's not an issue; they don't even ask the questions or collect the information. It's seen as an everyday little personal issue and GPs, I'm afraid, are not proving very sympathetic to those mothers that are coming through their door. At the end of the day, no one is taking it seriously."

Of more than 2,000 mothers questioned, 70% were given antidepressants when they approached their doctor. The Nice guidelines recommend early diagnosis and quick access to treatment to limit the damaging effect postnatal depression has on the baby, the partner and other children in the family. The international health body states that psychological therapies should be offered as an alternative to antidepressants.

"The Nice guidelines are clear, just as it's clear they are being flouted. This report shows a massive default towards antidepressants when proper care is within the gift of health professionals," said Longfield.

Several celebrity mothers, including Gwyneth Paltrow, Sadie Frost and Zoe Ball, have testified to the damaging effects of postnatal depression: "At my lowest, I was a robot. I just didn't feel anything," said Paltrow.

One woman, identified only as Natalie, told the researchers: "I was concerned that I was losing weight, not eating, not myself. The GP was dismissive. He said: 'You've just had a baby. It's just your hormones. Antidepressants will help you get through it.' I felt pushed out of his surgery with a prescription in my hand that I had said I didn't want.

"I'm the single mother of three children and need to be alert if I am to look after them properly," she said. "Eventually, I went to the health centre just to get some food vouchers. The health visitor recognised the symptoms of postnatal depression immediately and organised counselling for me. After four weeks I started to feel a great improvement, but it was sheer luck that I finally got help."

For others, help came too late. Jess Stoneham, 36, suffered postnatal depression after the birth of her baby three years ago. It contributed, she says, to the breakup of her marriage. "I knew things were very different from the first time round, but everyone just said I was more tired because I had a toddler as well as a baby. It's true I was shattered, too tired to stand up for myself – certainly with everyone, from the doctor to the health visitor to my mother, telling me I would be fine.

"Well, I wasn't fine, but no one recognised the symptoms and it makes me really sad that my son had to be without a mother for the first year of his life because I, effectively, was a wreck. It didn't have to be like that."

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2011/oct/01/nhs-failing-postnatal-depression-women?INTCMP=SRCH>