

# Thousands of new mothers suffer in silence from postnatal depression



Tens of thousands of new mothers are suffering in silence from postnatal depression with many not speaking up for fear of having their children taken away, a study reveals.

Tens of thousands of new mothers are suffering in silence from postnatal depression, a report claims Photo:

REUTERS

7:30AM BST 03 Oct 2011

As many as 35,000 mothers every year in England and Wales struggle with the condition but do not seek professional help, the report by the charity 4Children found.

Thousands more fail to receive prompt treatment due to "serious shortcomings" in the system for referral together with an "over-reliance" on antidepressants and the stigma attached to talking about the condition.

The charity's poll of more than 2,000 mothers found that 49 per cent who had suffered postnatal depression did not seek professional help, with first-time mothers less likely than those with several children to do so.

A third said they were too scared to tell anyone about their depression because of fear over what might happen to themselves or their baby.

According to the Royal College of Psychiatrists, 10 to 15 per cent of women suffer from postnatal depression.

Symptoms can include feeling very low, struggling to look after the baby, and finding simple tasks such as showering or cooking difficult to manage.

While postnatal depression usually starts within a few months of birth, around one in three women experience symptoms in pregnancy which then continue.

Treatment options depend on the severity of the depression, but include medication and counselling. Several celebrities, including actress Gwyneth Paltrow, have spoken of their experience of the condition, which experts argue should not be dismissed as the "baby blues".

The report says postnatal depression is leading to relationship difficulties and breakdown, pressure on older children to look after babies and children living with the "long-term consequences of poor early bonding". It argues that health workers, including GPs, need to do more to recognise and diagnose postnatal depression early.

Almost a third of women in the survey who had the condition did not realise their symptoms were postnatal depression.

And 60 per cent did not believe at the time that their symptoms were serious enough to warrant treatment. Some 70 per cent were prescribed antidepressants by their GP while just 41 per cent had access to a talking therapy, despite this being recommended as an option for the treatment of mild to moderate depression.

Women also wished for more support for their partners, with 39 per cent saying he needed to discuss his anxieties with someone and 11 per cent wanting treatment for their partner, who they believe was also depressed.

The report criticised the fact primary care trusts (PCTs) and the Department of Health do not collect data on the prevalence of postnatal depression.

Anne Longfield, chief executive of 4Children, said: "Postnatal depression is a problem that, with the right help early on, can be treated successfully, avoiding long-term impact on the rest of the family.

"However, many families are suffering the consequences of postnatal depression in silence, and even when they do seek help they all too often encounter a wall of indifference and a lack of empathy from medical professionals with an over-reliance on antidepressants for treatment.

"The best ways to treat maternal depression are set out clearly in guidelines from the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (Nice), but all too often there is a shocking lack of awareness.

"So many women have to rely on luck to come across a sympathetic GP or health visitor who will lead them to the right course of treatment.

"This report calls for an end to the neglect of this destructive and prevalent illness to ensure that every mother is guaranteed the practical and emotional support she needs to avoid her unnecessary suffering and that of her family."

Mumsnet co-founder Justine Roberts said: "Given the volume of women who support each other through postnatal depression on Mumsnet, it comes as no surprise that many, many more women suffer from postnatal depression than the official figures show.

"There are lots of reasons why mothers often find it easier to talk about anonymously online than to seek medical treatment but it is important that all mothers get the full range of support they need to help them through this debilitating illness."

Sue Macdonald, education and research manager at the Royal College of Midwives (RCM), said: "The need to prepare women and their families for the possibility that they may experience postnatal depression, and developing strategies for dealing with this is really important.

"The midwife is the key professional to provide this information and support during pregnancy, and during the first month after childbirth, following which the care passes to the health visitor."

Elizabeth Duff, senior policy adviser at the National Childbirth Trust (NCT), said: "Postnatal depression is a complex and sadly relatively common condition which can affect anyone, and is recognised in men as well as women. "Lack of support and isolation are often key causes, as parents come to terms with their new role.

"We would like to see families well-supported throughout pregnancy, birth and in the early days of being a parent, with one-to-one care from a midwife who has time to get to know them and establish a relationship of trust. "Midwives and other health professionals should also be aware of the condition, its symptoms, and how to refer families to get support.

"While antidepressants may help, many women benefit from counselling and other forms of support."

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/health/healthnews/8802185/Thousands-of-new-mothers-suffer-in-silence-from-postnatal-depression.html>