

The realities of becoming a dad.

It's understandable that we focus on mums in the postnatal period but let's not forget dads who also need support. Most people are surprised to know that around 1 in 20 men experience depression during their partner's pregnancy and up to 1 in 10 new dads struggle with depression following the birth of their baby. Becoming a father for the first time can be one of the happiest times in your life, it can also be a very emotional and confusing experience. Whether it's sleep deprivation, financial worries, new responsibilities, being a provider, protector, and engaged dad, wanting to do things differently from your father, and the shift of relationship dynamics with your partner, don't underestimate anything, you also have a lot to take on board.

Here's what you need to know about postnatal depression in men.

- Postnatal depression often goes undiagnosed
- The peak time for postnatal depression is three to six months after birth
- Hormonal changes can play a role - just as with mums, changes in hormones might make postnatal depression in dads more likely. Hormones including testosterone, oestrogen, cortisol, vasopressin, and prolactin may change in dads during the period after their babies arrive
- Postnatal depression is more likely if there is maternal postnatal depression too
- A range of factors can make you more likely to get postnatal depression: if you are under 25 you are more likely to go through postnatal depression. Other major risk factors include a history of depression and anxiety; financial pressures; and evidence also shows that not being in a relationship with your child's mother, sleeping or crying issues with your baby, drug abuse or dependence, and feeling unsupported by your partner
- Postnatal depression can take its toll on your relationship
- It can also affect the relationship they have with their child. You are likely to play, engage less sing and read with your children and talk more negatively about and to them. You may also discipline them more harshly
- It may impact the development of your child, Dads' depression is associated with emotional, social and behavioural problems

Postnatal depression in Dads can show itself in different ways, symptoms may include:

- fear, confusion, helplessness and uncertainty about the future
- withdrawal from family life, work and social situations
- indecisiveness
- frustration, irritability, cynicism and anger
- relationship conflict
- partner violence
- negative parenting behaviours
- alcohol and drug use
- insomnia
- physical symptoms like indigestion, changes in appetite and weight, diarrhoea, constipation, headaches, toothaches and nausea



The Stigma Around Male Postpartum Depression

There are quite a few misconceptions about becoming a dad. Many people still expect dads to be the unemotional rock – someone who can be relied on to deal with issues as they arise and not be vulnerable to confusion, hurt and lack of confidence. So when men start to feel anxious, empty, or out of control, they don't understand it and they certainly don't usually ask for help. Dads almost always assume they're alone in feeling sad or scared (you're not).

Experts believe that paternal postpartum depression may be more prevalent now largely because this generation of fathers is feeling the same psychological, social, and economic stressors that some mums have long experienced. The trend toward dads staying home with Baby while mum goes off to work is becoming more widespread. With more mums choosing to work, dads are shouldering child care and household tasks that traditionally fell to women.

Importantly, we know that many new dads come to parenting with certain expectations of themselves as fathers, and how they will cope with being a father. The reality is often quite different. And sometimes the shock of expectations not being met, and adjusting to the new reality, can contribute to postnatal anxiety or depression.

Common myths of becoming a dad:

- Dads aren't needed while babies are newborn - wrong, there are so many things you can do
- Dads play a secondary role to mums in the raising of young children - wrong, it's an equal role
- A dad's primary role in the family unit is to be the main financial breadwinner - wrong
- Dads are strong and robust, and don't have any emotional needs - wrong, everyone has emotional needs
- Dads are less nurturing, gentle and protective of their children than mums - wrong, I've met plenty of nurturing, loving, gentle and protective dads
- A man's life doesn't greatly change when he becomes a father - wrong, it does change
- All men prefer to be at work than stay at home to look after their children. A man who prioritises fatherhood is not a 'real' man - wrong and such a damaging thought!
- A man is destined to be the same kind of father as his own dad was - wrong, you have the ability to change any aspect
- Men can't get perinatal anxiety or depression - wrong, you can

Realities of becoming a dad.

Having a baby brings many challenges, and it can take some time to adjust, it can be stressful, challenging but also wonderful. You play a crucial role in the early days of parenting, many challenges that occur during early parenthood are complex and require discussion, consultation or reaching out to others for advice or help. Some dads feel torn between being at work and being able to support their partner and care for their new baby, but contributing to your baby's wellbeing by being involved in the day-to-day care of your little one is doable. There are plenty of things you can do such as bathing, changing, cuddling, showering with your newborn (great skin-to-skin contact which helps with bonding), baby massage, singing, chatting about your day, settling and babywearing to name a few. Often you can feel just as confused, anxious, or lonely as new mums. Sometimes a chat or a beer with mates isn't sufficient to address complex problems: sometimes you need to reach out to professionals for help (contacts below).

Your baby's needs can be quite overwhelming early on, but it is important to remember that your needs and those of your partner are still super important, too. Talk to your partner about how you are feeling and don't forget to check in with how she's going too: you're in this together.

