

When Mothers Should Get Help After Having a Baby

While most new mothers will find themselves feeling a bit sad or nervous for the first few weeks after birth, those feelings should improve by 3 weeks postpartum. If a mother is past that point, and she has symptoms that are causing her significant distress, discomfort or impairment, it's time to refer her for treatment.

Sleep: It's normal for new mothers to feel tired. However, new parents should be able to fall asleep when the baby falls asleep and wake up when the baby wakes up.

What's concerning:

Hypersomnia: She's so tired that she can't rouse herself, even when the baby is awake.

Insomnia: It takes her more than 20 minutes to fall asleep after putting down the baby at night. She finds it hard to fall asleep, even when she's exhausted. She finds her mind racing or worrying at night.

Excessive nighttime vigilance about baby: Some anxious parents will set alarms at night to check on the sleeping baby. If the baby is healthy, this is likely a sign of Postpartum OCD.

Less Need for Sleep: Very rarely, childbirth can trigger elevated mood. These mothers find themselves needing much less sleep and not feeling tired at all during the day. These mothers may stay up and clean or work on other projects rather than sleeping. It's very important to get these mothers back on a good sleep schedule and refer for evaluation.

Appetite: It's normal for new mothers to have the same, or greater, appetite than before childbirth.

What's concerning:

Loss of appetite: Appetite loss is a concerning symptom that is associated with both depression and anxiety.

Binge Eating: Eating an objectively large amount of food while feeling out of control.

Restricting calories: All mothers are eager to return to pre-baby weight, but mothers with a history of eating disorder may restrict calories. This is especially unhealthy if the mother is breastfeeding.

Mood: Mothers may feel a bit more emotional than usual in the first few weeks after childbirth, either sad, irritable or nervous. These feelings improve in most mothers by the third week postpartum.

What's concerning:

Depressed mood: Feeling down, tearful, guilty, hopeless, ashamed or anti-social.

Anxious mood: Feeling restless, panicky (racing heart rate, sweating, tingling skin)

Elevated mood (rare): Feeling much more confident than usual, taking risks, feeling special or unique.

Hygiene: It's harder to find time to shower and get dressed with a newborn. However, most mothers will take care to shower and look reasonably put-together for a trip out to see friends
Severely depressed mothers: may not feel care much less than usual about their appearance and hygiene. A mother with noticeably unwashed hair or body odor may be significantly depressed.

Thoughts: It's normal for new mothers to notice a big shift in their thoughts. New mothers may spend a lot more time thinking about the baby or having some worries about how the baby is doing. If there are worries, it's normal for those worries to go away once the issue has been checked out.

What's concerning:

Depressed thoughts: "I'm a terrible mother." "I'll never get better at this." "This baby deserves a better mother."¹ Thoughts of wanting to run away from home and start a new life. Thoughts of death, dying and suicide (see below.)

Anxious thoughts: Mental images of the baby dying or being injured, excessive fears about the baby becoming ill, worries about being a danger to their own baby..

Odd Thoughts (rare): Paranoid thoughts (e.g. the neighbors want to steal the baby,), feeling like her thoughts are monitored by others, believing that the TV/radio/internet is broadcasting information directly to her, thinking that there is something extremely special or evil about the baby, thinking that she's discovered a new insight or connection (e.g. understanding the nature of God or the universe.)

¹ This thought is particularly concerning because it is associated with maternal suicide.