

A helping hand

You've probably heard all about postnatal depression and what to look out for, but now the focus is on mental health check-ups during pregnancy as well

Among the many forms you're asked to fill out while pregnant, a tick-the-box questionnaire about your mood in the previous week could be the most important.

Most public hospitals have introduced the Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale as a routine part of the checking-in process with midwives.

This set of 10 questions is designed to help identify whether you may have symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Based on your score and an in-depth interview about your lifestyle, relationships and how you feel about the pregnancy, your midwife will decide whether to refer you for extra support or counselling during your pregnancy.

Catherine Knox, CEO of the Gidget Foundation, says recent studies show

that up to 10% of women experience anxiety and depression during pregnancy. "Research is also pointing to early intervention resulting in much better outcomes for the mother, her relationship with her partner and her children," says Catherine, whose charity promotes awareness about anxiety and depression during and after pregnancy.

PREGNANCY BLUES

While public hospitals have introduced this screening, private hospitals and obstetricians don't routinely check pregnant women for anxiety and depression. This means that the one third of women with private health care in Australia will possibly miss this important mental health check during their pregnancy.

Signs to look for

The 10% of women who experience antenatal depression are also at increased risk of experiencing postnatal depression. In either case, the symptoms can include:

- Feeling low, flat, anxious, worthless, guilty or ashamed
- Lacking energy or wanting to sleep all the time
- Insomnia
- Loss of appetite
- Lack of motivation to do anything
- Withdrawing from social contact.



"It's a gross generalisation, but most obstetricians are more focused on the physical situation of the mother and baby, and there's often not much discussion of the emotional aspects," says Catherine. "It's often up to the woman to bring it up, and that can be really difficult if you're not feeling great."

A CHANCE TO TALK

But now, Sydney's Royal North Shore Private Hospital is introducing an Emotional Wellbeing Program using a \$252,000 grant from the NIB Foundation. Under the program, all women having babies at the hospital – an estimated 2500 each year – will be offered an appointment with a midwife to talk at length about their pregnancy.

Catherine, who pushed for the program's introduction, says the second

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trimester appointment will include the Edinburgh Scale, as well as a wide-ranging talk with the midwife.

"Every pregnant woman has lots of blood tests and this is a great opportunity for them to talk about not just their physical health, but their emotional health and their feelings too," says Catherine.

Obstetrician Dr Vijay Roach, *P&B* expert and Gidget Foundation chairman, says awareness of antenatal anxiety and depression is not high in the community nor among health professionals.

"It may manifest as insomnia, anxiety, despondency and depression," says Vijay.

A screening system will not only help identify women suffering from the condition, but will also create an opportunity to discuss issues they may not have considered about being a mum.

"Having a baby is a big life transition and a lot of women don't register that, so having this conversation brings up issues they might need to think about," says Catherine. And it might just mean that the adjustment to becoming a mother isn't such a big shock.

"That's why antenatal screening is so important, because it can break the cycle, before it gets really complex," says Catherine. "Many, many years ago I experienced antenatal depression, and if anyone had asked me the question [about my emotional wellbeing], the whole story of my life would have been very different – so that's why I have a personal barrow that I'm pushing." ■

The Gidget Foundation has resources and information available on its website, www.gidgetfoundation.com.au.

Where to get help

If you are experiencing symptoms of antenatal or postnatal depression, it's important to share your feelings with someone you trust and to seek immediate help. Men can suffer from mood changes too. Contact:

- beyondblue on 1300 224 636 or www.beyondblue.org.au
- The Post and Antenatal Depression Association (PANDA) on 1300 726 306 or www.panda.org.au
- Lifeline (24 hours) on 13 11 14 or at www.lifeline.org.au
- Tresillian Parents Help Line (24 hours) on 1800 637 357 or at www.tresillian.net.



Tip the scales

They're 10 simple questions, but they have been widely used to help health professionals all over the world identify women at risk of developing anxiety and depression during or after pregnancy. The Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale does not provide a diagnosis, but your score can highlight potential problems which might need addressing. You can download the Edinburgh tool from www.beyondblue.org.au.

