

Postpartum Depression

¹Purma Sharanya*, ²Saba Shafeen

¹Student of Joginpally B.R. Pharmacy College, Moinabad

²Assistant Professor, Department of Pharmacology in Joginpally B.R. Pharmacy College, Moinabad
Joginpally B.R. Pharmacy College, Moinabad, R.R.District, Hyderabad, Telangana-500075

Abstract-Postpartum depression (PPD) is a significant mental health concern affecting approximately 10–20% of new mothers worldwide. It is characterized by persistent sadness, anxiety, fatigue, and impaired mother-infant bonding, potentially impacting both maternal well-being and child development. This review explores the epidemiology, risk factors, pathophysiology, diagnosis, and treatment options for PPD. Biological factors such as hormonal fluctuations, genetic predisposition, and inflammation, along with psychosocial stressors, contribute to its onset. Early screening and intervention, including psychotherapy, pharmacotherapy, and lifestyle modifications, are crucial for effective management. Future research should focus on personalized treatment strategies and addressing healthcare disparities to improve outcomes.

Index - Terms: Depression, Postpartum Depression (PPD), DSM-5 Diagnostic Criteria, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs).

INTRODUCTION

Postpartum depression (PPD) is a significant and often under-recognized mental health condition that affects a substantial number of women following childbirth. Characterized by persistent feelings of sadness, anxiety, and fatigue, PPD can severely impact a mother's ability to care for herself and her newborn. The condition typically emerges within the first few weeks to months after delivery, although its onset can extend to a year or more in some cases.

While many new mothers experience transient mood changes often referred to as the "baby blues," PPD goes beyond these temporary emotions, manifesting as a clinical depression that can lead to profound distress and functional impairment. Its symptoms include feelings of hopelessness, overwhelming anxiety, irritability, difficulty bonding with the baby, and, in severe cases, thoughts of self-harm or harm to the baby.



Fig-1 Suffering from Postpartum Depression

Comparison of Postpartum blues, Postpartum depression, Postpartum psychosis

Postpartum blues	Postpartum depression	Postpartum psychosis
Affects up to 80% of new mothers	Affects between 10% to 15% of new mothers	Affects 1-2 out of 1000 new mothers
Crying	Persistent sadness	Auditory and visual hallucinations
Sadness	Poor concentration	Paranoia
Anxiety	Feelings of worthlessness and guilty	Anxiety
Irritability	Irritability	Agitation
Insomnia	Anhedonia	Insomnia

Postpartum depression, postpartum blues and postpartum psychosis are compared [4]

The Etiology of PPD is multifactorial, with genetic, hormonal, psychological, and environmental factors contributing to its development. Fluctuations in

hormone levels postpartum, combined with the challenges of adjusting to motherhood, can trigger or exacerbate depressive symptoms. Additionally, previous mental health history, lack of social support, and stressful life events play significant roles in the risk of developing PPD.

Postpartum depression symptoms are comparable to those of depression. They consist of:

- Decreased energy or tiredness;
- Inability to focus or pay attention for extended periods;
- Low self-confidence and self-esteem;
- Disturbed sleep, even while your infant is asleep;
- Mood swings [1]

The symptoms of postpartum depression are similar to those of major depressive disorder (MDD), but they are specifically tied to the postpartum period. In contrast to the "baby blues," which are transient and mild, PPD persists for weeks or months and can significantly impair the woman's functioning.

- Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT): With CBT, people learn to challenge and change unhelpful thoughts and behaviors to improve their depressive and anxious feelings. People also learn different ways of reacting to situations. CBT can be conducted individually or with a group of people who have similar concerns.[21]
- Physical Symptoms: Women with PPD often experience physical symptoms, including fatigue, changes in appetite (either overeating or lack of appetite), and disrupted sleep patterns. Interestingly, some women with PPD may struggle with excessive sleeping or insomnia, and these symptoms can be cyclical, exacerbating feelings of exhaustion and frustration [19]
- Severe Cases (Postpartum Psychosis): A rare but severe complication of postpartum depression is postpartum psychosis, which affects approximately 1-2 in 1,000 new mothers. It involves hallucinations, delusions, and intrusive thoughts that can lead to a risk of harm to the infant or mother. This condition requires immediate psychiatric intervention and hospitalization [20]

Epidemiology

Globally, the prevalence of postpartum depression varies, but studies suggest that approximately 10-20% of women will experience significant depressive symptoms in the first year after childbirth. Some research, however, places the prevalence as high as 35% depending on the population studied

Cultural Variations: The prevalence of PPD differs across countries and cultural contexts. In low- and middle-income countries, where access to mental health care may be limited, the prevalence of PPD is often underreported, and women may not have the resources to seek professional help.

Risk Factors: Several risk factors for PPD are well-established:

- Personal or Family History of Mental Illness: Women with a history of depression, anxiety, or other mood disorders are at significantly higher risk of developing PPD [16]
- Sleep Deprivation: The demands of caring for a newborn often result in sleep deprivation, which can exacerbate or even trigger depressive symptoms. A vicious cycle of sleep deprivation and depression can develop, where the symptoms of PPD lead to worse sleep patterns, and vice versa[17]
- Socioeconomic Factors: Women from lower socio-economic backgrounds, those experiencing financial stress, and those in less stable living conditions are more vulnerable to PPD. Studies also indicate that women of certain ethnic groups, particularly African American, Hispanic, and Indigenous women, are more likely to develop PPD, although this may also be influenced by socio-economic and cultural factors[18]

Causes

Postpartum depression has multiple causes, including genetics, physical changes, and emotional problems. **Genetics.** Research indicates that a family history of postpartum depression, particularly a significant one, raises the likelihood of developing postpartum depression.

- Physical changes. A sharp decline in your body's levels of the hormones progesterone and estrogen following childbirth may be a contributing factor to

postpartum depression. A significant decline in other thyroid-produced hormones may also result in feelings of exhaustion, sluggishness, and depression.

- Problems with emotions. Lack of sleep and stress can make it difficult to deal with even small issues. You might worry about how you'll be able to care for a newborn.
- Emotional issues - Lack of sleep and stress can make it difficult to deal with even small issues. Your ability to care for a newborn may be a source of anxiety. You can experience issues with identity, feel less beautiful, or believe that you no longer have control over your life.
- Any of these issues can contribute to postpartum depression.[2]
- Postpartum depression is thought to affect 6.5–12.9% of women, or possibly more in lower- and middle-income nations.

Reproductive hormones are known to modulate behavioural, emotional and cognitive response, therefore rapid changes in estradiol and progesterone plasma concentrations during pregnancy and labour create a vulnerable terrain leading towards postpartum disorders. New research shows that women suffering from postpartum disorders have abnormal neural responses, suggesting a neuroendocrine explanation for postpartum syndromes[15]. Potential causes of postpartum depression include social and genetic factors, such as low social support, marital difficulties, intimate partner violence, past abuse, and negative life events, in addition to hormonal changes. Postpartum depression has a diverse natural course.[3]

The development of postpartum depression (PPD) is complex and not yet fully understood. Several models and theories have been proposed to explain its onset:

1. **Biological Model:** This model suggests that the dramatic and abrupt decline in pregnancy-related hormones—such as progesterone, estradiol, and cortisol—after childbirth may contribute to PPD. During pregnancy, levels of these hormones rise significantly and then sharply decrease postpartum, potentially leading to systemic dysregulation. However, the exact relationship between hormone withdrawal and depression, as

well as the occurrence of depressive symptoms during pregnancy, remains unclear.[22]

2. **Stress Hormone Imbalance Model:** This perspective associates PPD with dysregulation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, the body's central stress response system. Imbalances in stress hormones, particularly cortisol, have been linked to PPD. Recent studies suggest that HPA axis dysregulation plays a significant role in the development of PPD.[23]

The dysregulation of cortisol, adrenaline, and norepinephrine brought on by ongoing stress can affect both physical and mental health, as demonstrated by a stress hormone imbalance model. Long-term stress can cause hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis dysfunction, which can exacerbate mood swings, immunological suppression, and metabolic diseases. Comprehending these mechanisms is essential for creating therapeutic approaches that address disorders linked to stress. [5]. Methyldopa lowers cerebral blood flow by reducing sympathetic stimulation and disrupting baroreceptor signaling, particularly affecting the orbitofrontal cortex, leading to cognitive decline and depression. It increases endothelial nitric oxide synthase (eNOS) and nitric oxide (NO) levels, which are neurotoxic, causing inflammation, cofactor depletion, and reduced serotonin and catecholamines, contributing to depression. Methyldopa also inhibits dopamine synthesis, leading to hyperprolactinemia, sexual dysfunction, and disruption of the brain's reward system, further promoting depression. By reducing dopamine, a key neurotransmitter in mood regulation, methyldopa impairs neuronal function and increases the risk of depression.[6]

Rapidly diagnosing postpartum depression

It is crucial to test for postpartum depression risk since it impacts the health of the mother, her child, and her entire family. A screening tool of some kind is now used by the majority of obstetricians during the postpartum examination. Because research indicates that many women with postpartum depression are ashamed of their symptoms and fear the social stigma attached to the diagnosis, screening is vital.

The following are typical symptoms of postpartum depression, though they might vary:

- Disruptions to sleep
- Feeling overburdened
- Agitated,
- Anxious, or preoccupied with the baby's feeding or health

Postpartum depression is diagnosed based on more than simply the existence of these symptoms. Some of these may be typical, particularly following a challenging night of sleepless care for a baby. The key to diagnosing postpartum depression is the severity of the symptoms and how they impact a woman's capacity to adapt and manage stressors in her life. [7]

Screening Tools

Early identification of PPD is essential. Healthcare providers often utilize standardized screening instruments, such as:

- Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale (EPDS): A 10-item self-report questionnaire specifically designed to identify PPD. A score of 13 or higher suggests the need for further evaluation.[24]
- Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9): A general depression screening tool that has been validated for use during the perinatal period.[25]

Treatment Options for Postpartum Depression

The treatment of PPD typically involves a combination of psychotherapy, medication, and lifestyle interventions. Early identification and treatment are essential to ensure the well-being of both the mother and the baby.

- Pharmacotherapy: Antidepressants, especially selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) such as sertraline, fluoxetine, and escitalopram, are commonly prescribed for PPD. These medications are generally considered safe for breastfeeding mothers, although the risks and benefits must always be discussed with a healthcare provider [8]
- SSRIs and Other Medications: These days, SSRIs are among the most often prescribed drugs. They can be applied in a variety of contexts outside of primary care and psychiatry, and they are used to treat a wide range of ailments. These drugs may

be taken by patients for an extended period of time. Therefore, the entire interprofessional team—clinicians, pharmacists, nurses, and other health professionals—must have accurate medication reconciliation. Better patient outcomes and fewer adverse events will result from this interprofessional approach to SSRI therapy.

- Because SSRIs are so widely used, it's important to remember serotonin syndrome. In an emergency situation, if a triage nurse suspects something, the emergency medicine doctor should start supportive treatment right away. Since treatment may necessitate immediate sedation and intubation, coordination with the intensivist and ICU nursing staff may also be necessary. For continuing treatment, a neurologist might also be crucial. Cyproheptadine has been tried by researchers with some success in small studies and case reports, despite the fact that there is no proven cure for serotonin syndrome. [9]
- Electroconvulsive Therapy (ECT): For severe cases of PPD, particularly when accompanied by psychosis or suicidal ideation, electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) may be considered. For severe depression, ECT is a safe and efficient treatment that can quickly reduce symptoms. [10]

Women at risk of postpartum depression, especially those with mild symptoms that don't fit the precise criteria for a formal diagnosis, should receive early therapy and support, according to Drs. Steward and Vigods' article. Supportive and psychological treatment immediately following delivery has been demonstrated to reduce the likelihood of postpartum depression in women who are at risk, according to studies. The following are important interventions that reduce feelings of loneliness and offer emotional support: home visits; peer support over the phone; and interpersonal therapy.

Providing a new mother with the treatment she requires after receiving an official diagnosis of postpartum depression is crucial. A woman's response to the intervention and the intensity of her symptoms determine the best course of action.

The preventative efforts for at-risk women are quite similar to the ones for postpartum women with mild symptoms.

Bipolar disorder, severe depression, and treatment-resistant mental illnesses can all be effectively treated with electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), which involves carefully applying electrical currents to the brain to cause a generalized seizure. With improvements in technique lowering cognitive side effects, ECT is still a proven and safe intervention despite its stigma. [11]

For women with moderate symptoms or those with mild symptoms who did not respond to the initial intervention, treatment consists of formal psychotherapy, either alone or in combination with an antidepressant medication. If the woman has trouble going to therapy, she might also decide to take antidepressants on her own. Major depressive disorder, bipolar disorder, and treatment-resistant schizophrenia are among the severe mental illnesses that can be effectively treated with electroconvulsive therapy (ECT). Under general anesthesia, a brief electrical stimulus is applied to the brain to cause a controlled seizure that alters neurotransmitter systems and neuroplasticity. Modern ECT methods, like unilateral electrode placement and ultra-brief pulse stimulation, have reduced cognitive side effects while increasing efficacy [12].

Prevention of Postpartum Depression

Prevention is key to addressing PPD. Several strategies can reduce the risk of developing PPD, particularly among high-risk women.

Prenatal Screening and Education: A crucial component of comprehensive postnatal care is PPD screening, which entails a methodical assessment of new mothers' mental health in order to pinpoint those who are suffering from PPD. Healthcare professionals can quickly identify and assist mothers who are at risk or impacted by the pregnancy by using standardized screening instruments during routine postpartum visits[13].

Postpartum Support: Ensuring adequate postpartum support through home visits, counseling, and peer support programs can significantly reduce the incidence of PPD. Support groups that provide a platform for women to talk about their experiences with new motherhood can reduce isolation and enhance mental well-being [14]

CONCLUSION

Postpartum depression is a serious condition that can have significant long-term effects on both the mother and the child. Understanding its multifactorial origins, recognizing its symptoms early, and providing timely treatment can significantly improve outcomes. Treatment options are varied and should be tailored to the individual needs of the mother, with a focus on psychotherapy, medication, social support, and lifestyle changes.

By fostering a supportive environment for new mothers and encouraging early intervention, the incidence of PPD can be reduced, and its impact can be mitigated. Continued research into the neurobiological underpinnings of PPD and the development of more effective preventative strategies will further improve the mental health of postpartum women worldwide

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