



Mental health and wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Information for pregnant women and women who have recently had a baby during the COVID-19 pandemic

There is much uncertainty, anxiety and fear related to the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly as information seems to change frequently. Pregnancy and the period after having a baby is an emotional time, and anxiety is just one of the many feelings women experience during this period. Most pregnant women, new parents and their families feel anxious sometimes. Healthcare providers, around the world have noticed that anxiety has increased in many pregnant and postpartum women and their families with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Anxiety is a normal response to a difficult, stressful or threatening situations and we all feel anxious at times like this. However, there are some basic things that we can all do to maintain our wellbeing during this pandemic:

- Proper hand washing
- Applying social distancing
- Reducing the risk of exposure to COVID-19
- Attending to our basic needs of getting adequate sleep, eating well and exercising regularly.

Reach out to local, national and international supports, like Post Partum Support International, Post Partum Support VA and more. As with the current situation related to COVID-19, unless you have been told otherwise by your healthcare provider, please follow the recommendations of the CDC, WHO and your local public health agency.

For some of you, due to the politicized landscape of COVID-19 in the United States, it is tough to know who and which sources to trust. Please do not rely on news media. Look directly to known agencies responsible for the safety of citizens.





Some common questions which may make you feel worried and anxious if you are pregnant or have recently had a baby:

1. How can I prevent myself from getting the infection?
2. What will be the impact of the virus on my unborn baby?
3. Will my mother or husband be allowed to stay with me during labor and delivery?
4. Is it safe to go to hospital for antenatal check-ups or scans?
5. Should I get tested for COVID 19?
6. Will breast feeding affect the baby?
7. Can my relatives hold the baby?

We suggest these are questions you forward to your OBGYN, midwife or pediatrician. The answers to these questions may be changing over the next few months. Remember, as a mom and as a patient you have the right to have your questions answered, especially now. The answer might, however, be “we don’t know.”

Managing your Anxiety:

Some amount of anxiety is natural and understandable during this time, however, it helps to talk to someone about it. We recommend talking to family and friends whom you trust. If your anxiety become excessive, reach out to your healthcare provider.

How do I know if my anxiety or distress is normal or excessive?

If you are anxious on most days for more than a couple of weeks and it starts to affect your everyday life, you may need to seek professional help. These are some symptoms that will help you recognize whether you have excessive anxiety:

- Feeling anxious, stressed, worried or nervous about getting COVID-19 even when you take all safety precautions and after being reassured.
- Feeling tense, restless or on edge
- Having anxious thoughts that keep coming into your mind and are difficult to control
- Physical symptoms such as tense muscles, a tight chest, fast heartbeat, feeling dizzy, difficulty breathing, sweating, having headaches, numbness or tingling
- Difficult sleeping because of anxiety
- Focusing excessively on social media messages about COVID-19
- Getting extremely anxious about family members' hygiene and starting to clean and wash things over and over.
- Worrying too much about missing work
- Trouble relaxing
- Becoming easily annoyed or irritable
- Feeling afraid as if something terrible might happen
- Feeling the need to check things repeatedly – e.g. checking if your baby is breathing
- Feeling sad and angry because of isolation and not being able to meet family and friends.

How can I protect myself from having excessive anxiety?

Here are four ways that many women find helpful:

Connecting:

- Talk to your doctor or midwife during face to face or a telephone consultation and ask how you can contact them if you feel anxious or worried about yourself or your baby's health. Ask if they can refer you for specialized perinatal mental health support.
- Talk with your family and friends over the phone and through video calls. Make time each day to connect with someone you love and who you know is supportive.
- Stay away from disturbing social media and TV programs.
- Ask your friends and family to avoid sending you messages that are negative. If possible, exit or mute social media or chat groups and forums where there are too many messages that you find disturbing or worrisome.

Preparation and planning:

- Prepare a plan in case you need to visit the hospital urgently, including:
 - Keep important phone numbers ready and easy to call such as: ambulance service, family and friends who you will need to call in case of emergency and let them know they are on your list.
 - Once the baby is born keep the pediatrician's or family doctor's number accessible.
- Some women find it helpful to divide their day into four parts: rest, enjoyable activities, work and exercise. You can set a certain time of your day for each part.

Reducing anxious thoughts:

1. Talk to someone. Not necessarily about your worries. Just chat about anything that will help you take your mind off things.
2. Choose an enjoyable activity and do it – for example, reading, listening to music, solving a puzzle, playing with your children, cooking a new recipe.
3. If you feel overwhelmed, find ways to comfort yourself such as: listening to soothing music, watching an enjoyable movie or show, slow breathing, prayer, reading your holy book or other books with wise words.
4. Remember the things that bring joy to your life.
5. Allow yourself to be creative: try some craft, make posters out of inspirational quotes, and write a diary or blog.
6. Practice compassion and kindness with yourself and others

Relaxing and mindfulness:

Find ways to relax such as: yoga, meditation, slow breathing, and mindfulness. You can practice them anywhere and anytime.

Some simple relaxation exercises:

Mindful breathing – Close your eyes, relax in a chair. Notice your feet resting on the ground. Focus on your breathing. Feel each breath as it comes in, and goes out, and in, and out.

If you start thinking of other things, bring your thinking back to your breathing again. If any sounds disturb you (e.g. the doorbell, birds or traffic), notice the sound, but bring your attention back to your breathing. You can do this for 10 breaths, or for 1, 3 or 5 minutes, then slowly open your eyes.

Square breathing – Breathe in to a count of 1-2-3-4.

Hold for 1-2-3-4. Breathe out for 1-2-3-4. Hold for 1-2-3-4. Do this three times.



What can family members do to help?

1. Be aware of signs of major worry or distress in your wife, sister or friend who is pregnant.
2. Listen. Do not minimize her worries – tell her it's normal to feel this way.
3. Try to address some of her concerns and encourage her to talk to her healthcare provider about her worries, rather than stressing about them by herself. Many consultations can now be done virtually or over the phone without going to the clinic.
4. Encourage her to follow a routine and engage her in interesting conversations or activities (for example, playing a game, doing a craft together, cooking together).
5. Discuss her plan for handling some situations such as if she has pain, bleeding or goes into labor. Create a plan for support with baby care if isolation continues.
6. Do some simple relaxation exercises together.
7. Avoid talking about your anxiety or stress with her as it may add to her anxiety.
8. Help her with baby care.
9. Ensure that she and her newborn baby gets enough sleep
10. Encourage her to get to know her baby, sing to her baby, and spend less time on the phone, television or computer.
11. Some pregnancy and/or childbirth-related rituals may not be possible due to the social isolation requirements. Try to find simple and memorable ways to celebrate at home, such as creating a memory book of the baby's first month, writing down messages from friends and family or getting them to record music or lullabies or messages and send them to the mother and baby. These small activities will help the mother feel connected even if her parents or partner or relatives cannot be nearby.

This information is important but does not take the place of medical or mental health care. Please follow the advice of your birth team professionals. Ask your healthcare provider about this information if you have questions.

Helpful resources:

<https://www.postpartumva.org/>

<https://www.postpartum.net/>

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>

<https://www.vdh.virginia.gov/coronavirus/>

https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus#tab=tab_1

(Of note, material on this website can be read in many different languages.)

References:

Guidance Note for Pregnant and Postpartum Women: Perinatal Mental Health Services, National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences, Bangalore, India, March 2020; and www.anxietycanada.com

Postpartum support International, website.

Postpartum support Virginia, website.

Disclaimer: Information related to COVID-19 is constantly evolving with several updates and recommendations daily.

This material was heavily adapted from a Sidra Health document. Many thanks and gratitude to Sidra Medicine, PO BOX 26999, DOHA, Qatar, www.sidra.org, for their willingness to share their material to help moms around the world.

