

Looking after yourself during pregnancy

Everyone's experience of pregnancy is different.

Whether planned or unplanned, your first time or not - pregnancy comes with excitement and joy, as well as real discomfort and challenges.

It is a time of tremendous change, and it is ok to feel nervous, uncertain or even scared. All mums feel anxiety at some point throughout their pregnancy.

Some stress, worry or anxiety is a normal part of any major life transition, and this usually passes. However, if you are noticing that your anxiety is becoming difficult to control, highly distressing or affecting your life – you may be experiencing **antenatal anxiety**.

Know the signs

Antenatal anxiety and antenatal depression refer to anxiety and depression during pregnancy.

One in ten Australian women are affected by antenatal depression.

Antenatal anxiety is more common, affecting one in five.

However, many women will experience both.

Symptoms can develop gradually, and early signs can be overlooked or dismissed as general effects of pregnancy. It's essential for us to recognise the signs so we can look after ourselves and the people we care about. Antenatal anxiety and depression are very treatable and help is available.

Many women who experience antenatal anxiety describe feeling stuck in a cycle. This can start with general worries about the baby and motherhood, which triggers worries about anxiety or stress harming the baby (i.e., worrying about worrying), which then leads to more feelings of anxiety.

There are some things that can place people at greater risk of experiencing antenatal anxiety or depression, such as:

- Having minimal supports
- History of abuse or domestic violence
- Unplanned or unwanted pregnancy
- History of conception or pregnancy complications
- Previous pregnancy loss
- History of mental health difficulties

Persistent worry is a key feature of antenatal anxiety. Mums commonly worry about:

- Potentially harming the baby
- Something bad happening
- Something being wrong with the baby
- Health of the baby
- Labour and birth
- Being a bad mother
- Pregnancy complications and loss
- Managing multiple children

These worries are associated with emotional, physical and behavioural changes:

Feelings	Physical symptoms	Behaviours
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fear • Shame • Guilt • Feeling tense or on edge • Irritability • Restlessness • Nervousness • Feeling overwhelmed • Mood swings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor sleep • Muscle tension, tightness in chest • Agitation • Panic attacks • Headaches and migraines • Tiredness, fatigue • Difficulties concentrating or making decisions • Nausea • Changes to appetite • Crying excessively or for no reason 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excessively checking (eg. scanning body for issues) • Constant reassurance seeking • Avoiding people or situations • Difficulties leaving the house • Increased cleaning or washing • Withdrawing from others • Loss of interest in things that normally bring joy (eg. spending time with friends and partner, hobbies)

Pregnancy can also be especially difficult for people with a history of assault or trauma. This can mean bodily changes and physical health checks can be extremely overwhelming. For other women, pregnancy can trigger antenatal obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). No matter what challenges pregnancy brings, it is always best to work with your doctor and get the support you need.

Things that can help

Anxiety and depression can occur at any time during pregnancy. Here are some practical tips to stay resilient during pregnancy:

01 GET INFORMED

Learning more about what is to come can help us feel more in control. If you are feeling anxious about childbirth, you can take a birthing class or speak with your GP or obstetrician. If you are nervous about parenting or managing multiple children, start by reading a book or speaking to friends with experience. Getting informed can demystify the process and is a productive way to manage anxiety.

02 BUILD A SUPPORT NETWORK

Talking about our experiences with people we trust does help us feel better. Research tells us that putting our feelings into words helps us process emotions, feel less alone and increase connection with others. Having open conversations helps reduce fear, shame and stigma. You may be surprised by how many other people have had similar struggles.

03 HEALTHY ROUTINE

Getting enough sleep, eating well, staying active and doing things we enjoy helps manage anxiety and low mood. During difficult times it's helpful to go back to the basics.

04 LIMIT SOCIAL MEDIA USE

Social media can be a source of connection, however for many people it can fuel unrealistic expectations about motherhood. Often people share the 'highlight reel' and leave out the harsh reality of having a new baby. Research shows that the more time we spend on social media, the more critical we can be towards ourselves. It may help to limit your social media exposure or ensure the accounts you follow show a balanced representation of mum life.

05 GET HELP

If anxiety or low mood are becoming constant, difficult to control and distressing – it's a good idea to speak to your GP. They can check your physical and mental health and discuss local support and treatment options with you. Pregnancy is a great opportunity to learn some additional coping strategies before the baby comes.

Getting support

If you are noticing your difficulties have persisted for longer than 2 weeks, are getting worse over time, or are making it hard to complete everyday tasks - these are signs that more support is needed.

There is no need to suffer alone, help is available. It's best to act early for your and your family's wellbeing.

We strongly recommend seeing your GP. They can give you a physical and mental health check up and discuss location support options.

- Find a professional trained in perinatal mental health via the e-COPE directory: www.cope.org.au/e-cope-directory/search/
- Find a child health centre via **Pregnancy Birth & Baby**: www.pregnancybirthbaby.org.au/child-health-centres
- Find a health professional or health service via **BeyondBlue**: www.beyondblue.org.au/get-support/find-a-professional

Additional services

- **PANDA** supports women and their families who are suffering perinatal anxiety or depression
1300 726 396
www.panda.org.au
- Gidget Foundation supports the emotional wellbeing of expecting and new parents
1300 851 758
www.gidgetfoundation.org.au
- **Centre of Perinatal Excellence (COPE)** provides support for the emotional challenges of becoming a parent
www.cope.org.au
- **Australasian Birth Trauma Association (ABTA)** is a national charity committed to reducing the incidence and impact of birth-related trauma whilst supporting affected women, families and health professionals.
www.birthtrauma.org.au/
- **Beyond Blue** provides free and confidential phone and online support with trained mental health professionals
1300 224 636
www.beyondblue.org.au