

Prevention in mind

All Babies Count: Spotlight on perinatal mental health

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- During pregnancy and in the year after birth women can be affected by a range of mental health problems, including anxiety, depression and postnatal psychotic disorders. These are collectively called perinatal mental illnesses.
- Perinatal mental illnesses affect at least 10% of women and, if untreated, can have a devastating impact on them and their families. When mothers suffer from these illnesses it increases the likelihood that children will experience behavioural, social or learning difficulties and fail to fulfil their potential.
- The onset and escalation of perinatal mental illnesses can often be prevented through early identification and expert management of a woman's condition, and prompt and informed choices about treatment. Even if the illness itself is not preventable, it is possible to prevent many of the negative effects of perinatal mental illness on families.
- Effective prevention, detection and treatment of perinatal mental illnesses could have a positive impact on the lives of tens of thousands of families in England, and improve the wellbeing, health and achievement of children across the country.
- Universal services – particularly midwives, GPs and health visitors – have an important role in identifying mothers who are at risk of, or suffering from, perinatal mental illness, and ensuring that these women get the support they need at the earliest opportunity.
- If we are to significantly reduce the harm caused by perinatal mental illnesses in England, a significant change is needed in our universal services so that health professionals are confident in detecting, discussing and dealing with mental illnesses. Mental health needs to be given parity of esteem with physical health in the work of primary care services.
- A range of services must be in place in every local area to ensure that women who are at risk of, or suffering from, perinatal mental illnesses are given appropriate support at the earliest opportunity. To achieve this there should be strategic commissioning of perinatal mental health care pathways in every area, based on accurate data or evidence-based calculations on levels of need.
- Specialist midwives can act as champions for women with mental illness in their area; provide women with specialist support; help to develop local care pathways, and provide training and advice for other maternity staff.
- In every area, women with perinatal mental illness should be able to promptly access psychological support if they need it, including both individual or group therapeutic services. Pregnant women and those with a baby should be a priority for psychological therapy (IAPT) services.
- Women with perinatal mental illnesses and their babies have specific needs, and it is important that they are given expert specialist care. Therefore every area should have a specialist community perinatal mental health team with expertise in this area.
- Expert early identification and management of perinatal mental illness should prevent women reaching the point where they need inpatient care. However, if women with severe perinatal mental illness do need to be admitted for 24 hour care, it is important that they can access a specialist Mother and Baby Unit. Without access to a specialist unit, women can go without the intensive expert care that they need, and are separated from their babies, which is traumatic and can disrupt vital early bonding.
- If untreated, perinatal mental illness can inhibit a mother's ability to provide her baby with the sensitive, responsive care that he or she needs. To reduce the impact of perinatal mental illness on babies, mothers must get timely support from services which explicitly address

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their interactions with their babies; supporting mothers to give babies the physical and emotional care that they need to thrive. Without this support, maternal mental illness can have a negative impact on infant mental health.

- Partners and other family members can provide important support to a woman who has a perinatal mental illness, and also reduce the impact of her illness on their baby and other children. Therefore it is important that services for women with perinatal mental illness engage, support and work with partners and other key family members.
- There is a wealth of evidence and expert consensus about what works in tackling perinatal mental illnesses, and some excellent services do exist. However, as the infographic on the next page shows, there are currently huge gaps in the services to support families affected by perinatal mental illnesses in England. These gaps mean that we are failing to prevent the harms caused by perinatal mental illness, jeopardising the current safety and wellbeing of women and children, and their future life chances.

This document is a call to action for key decision makers at a national and local level to work together to close these gaps, to improve the lives of families, and to prevent unnecessary suffering.