



HSE NATIONAL PROGRAMME

## Specialist Perinatal

MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

A large, semi-transparent family icon (man, woman, child) is centered on a textured orange and red background. A white, rounded rectangular frame is overlaid on the bottom left, containing the text.

What are  
Perinatal  
Mental Health  
Services?



# What are Perinatal Mental Health Services?

## About this Leaflet

This information is written for any woman who:

- Has a mental health problem and who is planning a pregnancy.
- Has had a mental health problem during pregnancy or in the first year after birth.
- Is at risk of having a mental health problem during pregnancy, or after birth.
- Has been referred to a perinatal mental health service and their partner, family and friends.

## The Leaflet covers:

- What a perinatal mental health service is
- When - and why - you might be referred to such a service
- Who works in these services
- What a perinatal mental health service can offer
- Other services for women with mental health problems, during pregnancy and in the first year after birth.

**Disclaimer:** This is information, not advice. You should read our full disclaimer before reading further. This information reflects the best available evidence at the time of writing. We aim to review our mental health information regularly, and update critical changes more regularly.

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## Mental health during pregnancy and after birth

Most of us expect to feel happy, excited and positive during pregnancy, and when our baby is born. But it doesn't always happen like this. You can feel many different emotions during pregnancy and after birth. These can range from love, pride and joy, to worry, sadness and frustration. It is natural to feel stressed or anxious at times during pregnancy - or when you have a new baby. These emotions are quite normal.

Up to 1 in 5 women have mental health problems in pregnancy or after birth <sup>(1-3)</sup>. Some of these are mild and some are more severe. You may:

- Already have a mental illness when you get pregnant
- Worry because you have had such problems in the past – this may make it more likely that you will become unwell during your pregnancy or after birth. However, with the right help, this can often be prevented
- Develop a mental health problem for the first time in pregnancy or after birth.
- But - there is effective help and support available if you are likely to have mental health problems during pregnancy or the first year after the birth.
- For more information see our leaflets: Mental Health in Pregnancy; Postnatal Depression; Perinatal OCD; and Postpartum Psychosis.

## What is a perinatal mental health service?

It is a service for any woman with mental health problems who is planning a pregnancy, pregnant or who has a baby up to one year old <sup>(4)</sup>. These services aim to:

- Help you stay as well as possible during pregnancy and after your baby is born
- Make sure that you, your family and other professionals can recognise if you become unwell - as soon as possible
- Give the best possible care, treatment, help and support to you and your family
- Help you to enjoy having your baby, and to develop confidence in being a mum
- Make sure that you, your partner and family have the information you need - and can get advice - about mental health problems and treatments
- Work together with you, your partner and family and the professionals involved.

## Does everybody need a perinatal mental health service?

A perinatal mental health service will usually look after someone who has a more serious or complex mental health problem. So, no, not every woman with a mental health problem during pregnancy, or after their baby is born, will need this service. You can get good care from your GP for mild to moderate mental health problems in pregnancy and after birth. If help from your GP is not enough, he or she can refer you to a perinatal mental health service.

You may already be seeing a community mental health team but you can still be referred to a perinatal service for expert advice and support, if necessary. The teams can work together with you, your family and any other professionals involved.

If you have a more severe mental health problem, you might need to come into hospital. This should be a specialist psychiatric Mother and Baby Unit (MBU) where you, and your baby, can be admitted together. However, there are no MBUs available in Ireland at present though the development of an MBU is planned, so currently women are admitted to a general psychiatric ward. If that happens, your partner or family will need to care for your baby. This will only be until you are well enough to care for your baby yourself. Most inpatient units will facilitate daily visits with your baby where appropriate. Your perinatal mental health service will have links with the nearest inpatient unit, so your perinatal psychiatrist or nurse can arrange admission if you need it. They will keep in touch while you are in hospital and help with plans for your discharge. After you leave hospital, they will carry on seeing you.

## Why could a perinatal mental health service help me?

You might find it helpful if:

- You have, or have had a serious mental illness (like Bipolar Disorder, Schizophrenia or another psychotic illness) and want to get pregnant. You can have preconception counselling. See our leaflet on Planning a Pregnancy for more information
- You have had Bipolar Disorder, Schizophrenia or another psychotic illness, and are pregnant – you may be more likely to have a mental health problem around the time of your birth
- You have been under the care of a mental health service for another serious mental health problem, such as severe Depression, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
- You have a family history of Bipolar Disorder or Postpartum Psychosis. This can increase your risk of developing Postpartum Psychosis
- Treatment from your GP is not helping enough.

## What help might I get from a perinatal mental health service?

Expert help for a wide range of mental health problems. This includes:

- Advice about your risk of developing a mental health problem in pregnancy or the postnatal period - and how to reduce this risk
- Helping you to weigh up the risks and benefits of using medication during pregnancy and breastfeeding
- Psychological treatments (talking therapies). Individual treatment as well as group therapies may be offered. Talking therapy can look at your past or how to cope with a current problem. It can help you to develop new ways to manage your symptoms. Some services offer “parent-infant” therapies to help bonding
- Support and advice to help you build both a positive relationship with your baby and a sense of confidence in being a mum
- Work closely with midwives, public health nurses, adult mental health teams and GPs
- Referring you to other services which offer practical help and support for families. This could be a local voluntary service or charity
- Helping you to plan for your care during pregnancy, birth and the postnatal period
- Giving advice and information about mental health problems to your partner and other family members. They will want to understand your illness, your risk of becoming unwell, and now how best to support you
- Arranging admission to a general psychiatric ward in an acute hospital if necessary
- Providing support for anyone discharged from an acute hospital setting
- Educating and advising GPs, midwives and other professionals, so they can give better care.

## Where can I meet a perinatal mental health service?

Perinatal mental health services are specialist services for women with a mental health problem. The service is for those who may have a mental health problem and are planning a pregnancy, pregnant women and women with a baby up to one year old who may have an existing or new mental health problem. Ask your GP or psychiatrist if they can refer you to a perinatal mental health service so you can see a perinatal psychiatrist for advice when you are planning a pregnancy. This is particularly important if you have had Bipolar Disorder, Schizophrenia, Postpartum Psychosis or any other psychotic illness <sup>(1,2)</sup>. It may also be helpful if you have had other severe mental health problems (e.g. Depression or Obsessive Compulsive Disorder).

Most services try to see women in convenient and child friendly locations. These include:

- Antenatal clinics
- Maternity wards

## Who can refer you to the perinatal mental health service?

You can usually be referred by any professional involved in your care, such as:

- Mental Health Midwife
- Midwife
- Obstetrician
- GP
- Psychiatrist



## Who is in the team?

In Ireland all maternity units/hospitals have access to perinatal mental health services through mental health midwives. Specific perinatal psychiatrists work from the larger hub sites: three in Dublin maternity hospitals and also in maternity units/hospitals in Limerick, Cork and Galway. These services can be accessed through your GP, midwife or obstetrician at the booking clinic. Mental health midwives in the smaller spoke hospital sites are a point of contact for additional mental health support, including access to liaison psychiatric services who have links to the specialist hub sites.

In hub sites, you are likely to meet one or more of the following:

**Perinatal psychiatrist** – this is a psychiatric doctor who will oversee your care. They can discuss your diagnosis with you, tell you what treatments might help and what the risk might be of you getting unwell during pregnancy or after birth. They can help you to decide about using psychiatric medication in pregnancy or when breastfeeding. They can also help you to use talking therapies.

**Specialist perinatal mental health nurse** – these are nurses who specialise in looking after women during pregnancy and the postnatal period. They can help you look out for signs of mental illness. They can teach you how to cope with any symptoms or worries you may have. They can also help you to develop your relationship and confidence with your baby.

**Perinatal Mental Health Midwife** – these are midwives with additional mental health training. They have an in-depth knowledge of the birthing process and the physical and emotional aspects of pregnancy and birth. They can advise and support you if you have mild to moderate mental health problems, including fear of birth or tokophobia. There should be a perinatal mental health midwife in each maternity unit/hospital in Ireland.

**Psychologist** – can offer short-term psychological treatments (talking therapies). These usually focus on how your mental health and pregnancy/parenthood

affect each other. They can help you to work out ways to manage your difficulties. They can also tell you about longer-term talking treatments that might help, and refer you to services that offer them.

**Mental Health Social Worker** – can offer additional support to you during the perinatal period. They can let you know of supports available to you in the maternity hospital you are attending but also in your local community. They are there to support you during your pregnancy and while you are attending the perinatal mental health service.

**Other professionals** – some services have other professionals as part of the team. These may include occupational therapists. They can provide support and practical advice to help you care for your baby and manage life as a parent.

## Who else might be involved in your care?

Lots of different professionals may be involved in your care during pregnancy and after birth. These usually include:

- Midwives
- Obstetricians
- Public Health Nurses
- GPs

Some women may also need:

- Mental health professionals from community mental health teams
- Social workers

A perinatal mental health service will work closely with all the professionals involved in your care. It will help everyone to work together, so that you and your family have the best possible care. This also means professionals can respond quickly to any problems.

You should be asked for your permission (or consent) before any information is shared amongst professionals. The reasons for doing this should be explained. However, if a professional has concerns about your safety, or the well-being of others (including your baby or other children), they have a duty to discuss these with relevant agencies. You should always be told if this is going to happen.

## Other services available

You can also get support from:

- Specialist mental health midwife – offers support for milder symptoms of anxiety or low mood, particularly when these are related to pregnancy or anxiety about birth. They also act as the link between perinatal mental health and maternity services.
- Psychological therapies – Talking therapies, such as CBT (cognitive behavioural therapy), are available. Many talking therapies are provided by psychologists, but sometimes other professionals are trained to provide these.
- Therapies can help with managing symptoms and thinking about any previous traumatic experiences or relationship difficulties. They can look at any problems in your relationship with your baby and help improve your confidence as a mum.
- Group therapies may also be available. These can help everyone realise that they are not alone in what they are experiencing. For example, new mums commonly have anxious thoughts and feelings – but these may be worse if you have a mental health problem. These worries are often about your baby, or about whether you are a good mum. It can help to know that other women have similar symptoms or worries. The therapist can teach you ways to reduce your anxiety and develop your confidence.
- GP – can diagnose a mental health problem, prescribe medication if you need it and refer you to other services.
- Public Health Nurses - provide advice and support about caring for your new baby. They can offer listening visits if you have Postnatal Depression.
- Health and Social centres - offer advice, practical and social support. Many can run mother and baby groups and drop-in sessions where you can meet other new parents and develop your confidence as a mum.
- Online resources – there are lots of websites which provide information and support for women with

mental health problems during pregnancy and beyond. Some of these are listed at the end of this leaflet.

- Your GP, midwife, mental health midwife and Public Health Nurse will know what support is available in your local area and can help you access this.

# Further information/ online resources



## Further information/online resources:

- 1. HSE's Your Mental Health** (<https://www2.hse.ie/mental-health/>). Find advice, information and support services for mental health and well-being.
- 2. MyChild** (<https://www2.hse.ie/my-child/>). Your guide to pregnancy, baby and toddler health. Trusted information from experts and Health services and support.
- 3. Cuidiú** (<https://www.cuidiu.ie/>). Caring Support for Parenthood. A parent to parent voluntary support charity.
- 4. Psychological Society of Ireland** (<https://www.psychologicalsociety.ie/>) This online voluntary directory is to help you find a psychologist who is recognised by the Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI) as being a Chartered Member of Society.
- 5. Tusla community based supports** – family resource centres. ([www.tusla.ie/services/family-community-support/family-resource-centres/](http://www.tusla.ie/services/family-community-support/family-resource-centres/)).
- 6. Action on Postpartum Psychosis** - [www.app-network.org/](http://www.app-network.org/) A charity for women and families affected by postpartum psychosis. Provides information and peer support, including online forums and workshops
- 7. Best Beginnings** - [www.bestbeginnings.org.uk/](http://www.bestbeginnings.org.uk/) Provides information about many aspects of pregnancy and parenting, including mental wellbeing, in the form of short video clips.
- 8. Maternal OCD** - [www.maternalocd.org/](http://www.maternalocd.org/). Support and Information for women with Perinatal Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.
- 9. Aware:** (<https://www.aware.ie>). Aware provides support & information for people who experience

depression or bipolar disorder and for their concerned loved ones. Freephone 1800 80 48 48.

- 10. Citizen's Information:** <https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/search/?q=pregnancy> Your rights and entitlements from the citizen's information board.
- 11. Relate** ([www.relate.org](http://www.relate.org)). Relationship support including couple and family counselling. Face-to-face, telephone or online counselling.
- 12. The Samaritans** ([www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)), <https://www.samaritans.org/ireland/branches/>
- 13.** Confidential emotional support for those in distress who are experiencing feelings of distress or despair, including suicidal thoughts. 24-hour free helpline 116 123 ; Email: [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)



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Building a  
Better Health  
Service

Seirbhís Sláinte  
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## Specialist Perinatal

MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

### Contact Details

Include your midwife, mental health midwife,  
PHN or other clinician details here:

IN CONJUNCTION WITH

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Clinical Design  
& Innovation

*Person-centred, co-ordinated care*

