The Straight Scoop on Pregnancy and Bipolar Disorder

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Postpartum Depression and Bipolar Disorder

Unfortunately, there have not been enough studies conducted about the relationship between bipolar disorder and pregnancy; we need more research on this very important topic. Nevertheless, we do have some information that can be helpful for women with bipolar disorder who want to have children or those who get pregnant unexpectedly.

Mental health simply must be a main focus in the life of any woman who has this illness. This does not change just because there is a baby on board. However, in the case of pregnancy, the health and well-being of the mother AND the child must be considered.

It is not surprising that women who have bipolar disorder have a greater risk of developing postpartum depression than women who do not have mental health issues. This is because women with this condition are much more susceptible to becoming depressed, even without being pregnant.

Let's talk more about postpartum depression and bipolar disorder, specifically how postpartum depression affects women who have bipolar disorder.

What Is Postpartum Depression?

Postpartum depression is a type of depression that may appear after a woman gives birth. It can start anytime during the baby's first year of life, but it typically presents itself within the first three weeks after pregnancy.

Women with this condition feel unexplained feelings of sadness, hopelessness and guilt because they have no desire to bond with their child. This can cause women to shy away from nurturing their infants, because they temporarily lose touch with their maternal instincts.

Symptoms of postpartum depression include:

- An impending feeling of despair
- Being unable to care for the baby
- Uncontrollable crying for no apparent reason
- Trouble bonding with the baby
- Loss of interest in pleasurable activities
- Sleeping a lot
- Difficulty with focus, learning or memory

Doctors are unclear as to why some women experience postpartum depression and others do not.

Why Bipolar Women Are at Greater Risk for Developing Postpartum Depression

There are a number of reasons why women with bipolar disorder are more likely to suffer from postpartum depression.

For starters, many women make the decision to stop taking their medications during pregnancy because they are afraid of the risks to the baby. Being unmedicated significantly increases the likelihood that a manic or depressive episode will occur not only during pregnancy, but after as well. It is not a long leap from bipolar depression to postpartum depression.

Also, the powerful hormonal changes a woman experiences during pregnancy can impact the functioning of the bipolar brain. This can lead to a decrease in the production of feel-good neurotransmitters like serotonin and dopamine; this may increase the risk for postpartum depression.

Finally, women with bipolar disorder are naturally very sensitive to stress. It goes without saying that a pregnancy can be very physically and emotionally stressful. Increased stress can trigger a depressive episode, which can result in depression post-pregnancy.

Medication and Pregnancy – What You Should Know

First of all, it must be said that if you have bipolar disorder and you get pregnant unexpectedly, you should NEVER suddenly stop taking your medication. This would not only be harmful to you; it would also put your baby at risk and significantly increase the likelihood of a miscarriage.

The fact is that all prescription medications have the potential to negatively affect an unborn child. Bipolar meds (antidepressants, antipsychotics and mood stabilizers, for example) are no different. Many of these medications can pose serious health risks to the baby. The child may be born with physical birth defects or have developmental delays later in life.

Trust Your Doctor for Guidance About Taking Meds While Pregnant

On the flip side, stopping the use of bipolar meds can be detrimental to the mental health of the mother during and after pregnancy, and can ultimately lead to postpartum depression. Not taking prescribed medications can trigger manic and depressive episodes, which pose their own set of problems.

I am not saying any of this to scare you and please remember I am not a medical professional. However, you need to be informed as much as you possibly can if you have bipolar disorder and want to get pregnant.

Your doctor is best equipped to treat you during your pregnancy and talk to you about a treatment plan if you are planning to get pregnant. Together, you will make important decisions about your medication regime and discuss the risks versus the benefits of continuing medication while you are pregnant.

How to Cope With Postpartum Depression

If you are actively engaged in treatment for your bipolar disorder, you should be seeing doctors regularly. These may include your primary care physician, a therapist, a psychiatrist, or other specialists. Keep these people close during and after your pregnancy. They will provide you with the care you need to ensure a healthy pregnancy for both mom and baby.

Once the baby is born, you and your doctor will decide how to move forward with medication treatment. If you suspect that you have postpartum depression, you should be completely open with your medical team. Only a doctor can properly diagnose you with postpartum depression. Once you have a proper diagnosis, you can move forward with a treatment plan and get the support of family and friends.

A Final Thought

Most women want to have children. Some get pregnant unexpectedly. No matter what your situation is, you can have a child and enjoy motherhood even though you live with this illness. Having bipolar disorder should not be a deterrent from pursuing your dream to have children and be a great mom if that is what you choose.