NEW DAD, SAD DAD

Men too can suffer from postpartum depression

By Christine Neff, USA Today

Scroll through the online forum at SADDADDY.COM to see new dads expressing the polar opposite of new baby bliss. There’s a dad who hasn’t slept in weeks and doesn’t know when he will get a full night’s rest again; a dad who feels trapped and useless, panicked by his own baby’s cries; a dad who worries about everything he thinks he’s doing wrong.

They’re not alone. A 2010 study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association showed that up to 14.1 percent of new dads in the U.S. have postpartum depression, a condition much more commonly associated with mothers.

There’s no question that paternal postnatal depression, or PPND, is real. Psychologist Will Courtenay became attuned to depression in new fathers about four years ago. He began shifting his research and therapy efforts to better understand the condition.

Signs of PPND are not easy to spot, he says. “When we think of somebody who is depressed, we think of somebody sad and crying. Men’s depression often doesn’t look like that. It can look more like irritability, anger, working constantly, or drinking and gambling too much,” he says.

Many factors can contribute to the development of PPND. Courtenay, in collaboration with the Centers for Men, Young Men and Boys at McLean Hospital, Harvard Medical School, recently finished collecting data on the subject from more than 4,000 fathers.

According to the study, postpartum depression in men is associated with an unplanned and/or unexpected baby, one with health or feeding problems, or a colicky baby who cries or screams frequently and for extended periods with no known cause.
The risk of depression rises if the father does not feel close to the baby or his spouse during this time and if he has little outside help. Certain family histories can put fathers at risk as well. Men who did not feel close to their own mothers growing up or who experienced a traumatic life change, such as the loss of a loved one, a life-threatening illness, a divorce, separation, loss of a job, or change of work in the past year, were at greater risk.

And then there is the physical side to caring for a new baby 24/7 that can wreak havoc on emotional states. The sleep deprivation, the hormonal changes. Yes, even men experience hormone changes in the postnatal period, says Courtenay. “Testosterone levels go down and estrogen levels go up. This can really set the stage” for depression.

Depression is rough on the dad, of course, but getting dads on the path to recovery is important for the health of the family as a whole. Dads with untreated depression put children at risk for social, psychological, and behavioral problems into adulthood.

A recent study in the Journal of Pediatrics said depressed fathers were more likely to spank their children and less likely to engage in positive interactions, such as playing games, singing songs, and reading books. A study in Child & Adolescent Psychiatry found that PPND was significantly associated with psychiatric disorder in children seven years later.

“All of these families seem to be blindsided,” says Miller. “They get a pamphlet at the hospital on postpartum depression and think, ‘That’s not going to happen to me.’”

A few weeks later, those same families may find themselves in crisis mode and not know where to turn. Courtenay says new dads may benefit from taking classes that teach the skills they need to be active caretakers. Dads today want to be more involved fathers than those of previous generations, but they often don’t have a model for those roles, he says.

Most important, new dads should seek professional help if the condition becomes unmanageable on its own. Medication is an option, but Courtenay finds men often respond quickly to talk therapy.

“It’s a cultural myth that men can’t talk about their feelings,” he says. “If you give men the opportunity to talk, they’ll talk.”

### 10 signs of paternal postnatal depression

1. Increased anger and conflict with others
2. Increased use of alcohol or other drugs
3. Frustration or irritability
4. Violent behavior
5. Losing weight without trying
6. Isolation from family and friends
7. Being easily stressed, feeling discouraged
8. Increases in complaints about physical problems and ongoing physical symptoms like headaches
9. Problems with concentration and motivation
10. Loss of interest in work or working constantly