

Early treatment important  
**Syndrome ranges from 'baby blues' to severe psychosis**  
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Postpartum distress is common but highly treatable.

"The biggest problem with depression is that people don't get help," said Dr. Susan G. Kornstein, executive director of both the Mood Disorders Institute at Virginia Commonwealth University and VCU's Institute for Women's Health.

**ON THE WEB**  
**VISIT** VCU's Mood Disorders Institute ([www.mood.vcu.edu](http://www.mood.vcu.edu)) and VCU's Institute for Women's Health ([www.womenshealth.vcu.edu](http://www.womenshealth.vcu.edu))

Postpartum mood disturbances fall into three general categories and are distinguished by the duration and degree of debilitation: postpartum baby blues, postpartum depression and postpartum psychosis.

The baby blues are most common, affecting up to 70 percent of women after delivery and typically lasting only a short time. Postpartum depression affects an estimated 10 percent of new mothers, who can experience mild to severe symptoms requiring treatment of some sort. Psychosis is the most severe form and should be considered a psychiatric emergency, Kornstein said. It is rare, affecting only 1 in 1,000 women, but is the mood disturbance that receives the sensational headlines. Andrea Yates, the Houston mother who drowned her five children, had this diagnosis.

Women diagnosed with postpartum depression are usually more dangerous to themselves than to their children, said Kornstein. Their feelings toward their children are more likely to be ambivalent.

"There's a miscommunication that all forms of postpartum [mood disturbances] lead to infanticide, which is not true," said Kornstein, a professor of psychiatry and obstetrics and gynecology.

Effective treatment options, as for depression in general, include psychotherapy, medication and electroconvulsive therapy. Some variations in treatment must be taken into consideration if the woman is breastfeeding, but the real danger lies in not seeking treatment at all, Kornstein said. Often, families and even physicians overlook postpartum depression, attributing symptoms to difficulty adjusting to life with a baby. Sleeplessness is not unusual for new mothers, but symptoms such as a lack of interest, feelings of guilt and hopelessness or worthlessness can indicate depression, Kornstein said.

"There is lots of evidence that untreated postpartum depression will affect mother-infant bonding and a child's cognitive and social development," said Kornstein, president-elect of the International Association for Women's Mental Health. "It's important to treat and treat it early."

As with all mental illnesses, postpartum depression carries a social stigma that is gradually being mitigated by patients sharing their stories publicly.

"I think when celebrities like Brooke Shields [who became involved in a public spat with actor Tom Cruise over her treatment] come forward and talk about their experiences . . . it really helps the public understand about it," said Kornstein. -Bill Lohmann

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