

Take Charge Of Your Health Today. Be Informed. Be Involved.



ESTHER L. BUSH

Postpartum health and wellness

This month's Take Charge of Your Health page spotlights postpartum health and wellness. Although this topic may not resonate with everyone, our entire community benefits when we all know how to lend a helping hand to new moms.

Following a birth, it is common for people to focus less on the mother and more on the baby. While such appreciation for a precious new life is natural, one-sided attention can dwarf the mom's needs and cause her to feel isolated. Moms-to-be have a remarkable influence on the children they carry—from what they eat, their environments and their overall health. Such influence continues after birth, when new moms' stamina and outlooks are tested during a period of transition and adjustment known as "postpartum." This period is too often overlooked in the pregnancy journey. The postpartum period is accompanied by significant changes in hormones, as women's bodies shift from what was needed during pregnancy back to pre-pregnancy hormone levels.

While they are undergoing these hormonal shifts, new moms are most likely also experiencing intense sleep deprivation. With the combined effects of internal and external change and the stress that comes with having a newborn, new moms must be supported properly to have the best health outcomes for themselves and their infants. Unfortunately, for some moms, sleep shifts to the bottom of their long to-do list, leaving them less alert, overwhelmed and unhealthy. Not surprisingly, we see evidence in recent studies that poor sleep is connected to postpartum depression in new moms. We all must remember that postpartum depression is common and not a sign of weakness. In fact, if moms are able to share their feelings with their friends, family or community, that's a sign of strength and a signal that we should rally around them.

There are many questions that we can ask ourselves when we have a friend or a loved one who is going through the wonderful journey of pregnancy. How can we offer support? Can we cook and clean for the new mom? Can we watch baby as mom sleeps? Can we find a supportive postpartum doula to aid in any way? These questions that we ask ourselves will eventually turn into action, leaving new mothers with more sleep, better health and strong support systems. I know for a fact that when we uplift and support the people who are responsible for bringing new generations into this world, they—and their children—will have better health. And better health is the most basic building block of a stronger community.

Esther L. Bush, President and CEO
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Words are powerful—How the language we use can be an insight into our mental health

by Tamar Krishnamurti, Ph.D.



TAMAR KRISHNAMURTI, PH.D.

During pregnancy, approximately 15% of women report experiencing depression. As many as 1 out of every 5 experience depression after giving birth. The stress and isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic has also made depression and anxiety worse for some pregnant people and new moms. More Black women suffer from depression than white women, but they are less likely to receive care for their mental health. Mental health challenges, like depression and anxiety, are especially important to address in pregnancy and right after birth. This is because mental health issues can make it more difficult for a mother and child to bond and can have long term health effects on both mom and baby.

Sometimes the social stigma surrounding depression makes it harder for pregnant people and new moms to share their mental health concerns with their doctor or midwife. The words we choose to use when we talk, however, offer insight into our state of mind. Tamar Krishnamurti, PhD, professor of medicine at the University of Pittsburgh, and her colleagues at Carnegie Mellon University, used something called Natural Language Processing to analyze the language of hundreds of pregnant and postpartum women who had been writing

about their days. She found that pregnant people and new moms who are depressed are more likely to bring up certain topics, like being physically exhausted, when talking about their day. New moms who are not depressed describe those same daily activities in terms of "keeping busy."

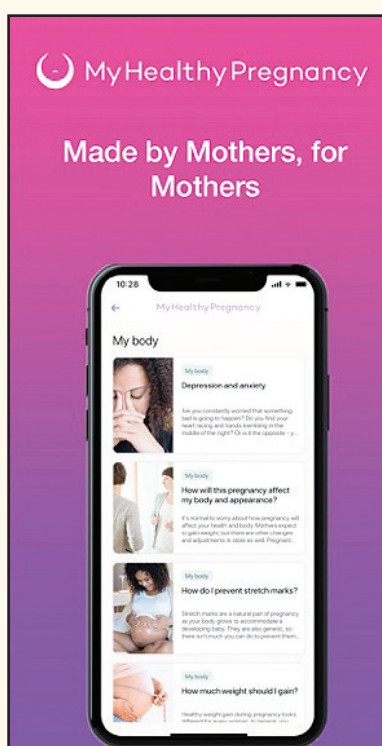
"People may be familiar with smart assistants like Siri or Alexa," says Dr. Krishnamurti. "Companies use natural language processing technology to figure out the things people might want to buy based on the language they use. We want to use the same kind of technology to help understand when pregnant people might be at risk of depression so that, with their consent, we can offer them better mental health resources."

Dr. Krishnamurti is hopeful that the MyHealthyPregnancy app, a smartphone app she built that is available for all UPMC patients who are pregnant, will be able to use the language and physical symptoms that pregnant people choose to share to deliver

more timely mental health resources to those that need them. Dr. Krishnamurti is also conducting the Maternal Wellness Journaling Study. This study is funded by the National Institute of Mental Health to better understand the relationship between the words people use to describe their experiences and their mental health during pregnancy and the postpartum period. The study involves people who are pregnant or have delivered a baby in the past 12 months. They may be eligible to participate in a journaling study. The study requires that people write a short journal entry once a week for five weeks and answer some questions about how they are feeling.

Information about the Maternal Wellness Journaling Study can be found by searching pittplusme.org for a study called "Language Use and Mental Health during Pregnancy and the Postpartum Period" or by emailing maternal.wellness.team@gmail.com.

Some people worry that that they should feel "too blessed to be stressed" when pregnant or after having a baby. However, it's very normal for the challenges and physical changes related to pregnancy and giving birth to affect mental health. There are resources that can help with pregnancy and postpartum depression. If you or someone you know could benefit from extra support or mental health resources during pregnancy or after a baby is



born, contact Postpartum Support International's HelpLine at 1-800-944-4773 or send a text to 503-894-9453 (English) or 971-420-0294 (Spanish). The service is available 24 hours a day. You will be asked to leave a confidential message. A trained and caring volunteer will return your call or text. They will listen, answer questions, offer encouragement and connect you with local resources as needed. You can also visit their website at <https://www.postpartum.net/>.

Study examines sleep, physical activity and postpartum health

New mothers have a range of experiences in the months after childbirth. These experiences vary from being joyful, exhausting, miraculous, stressful or a combination of them all. One area of postpartum life that is meaningful to all new moms is their health and wellness.

After giving birth, child bearers don't often feel as if they have much time to focus on themselves. Ask any new mother to describe postpartum experiences, and most will mention sleep—often the lack of restorative rest—and researchers are finding that sleep and sleep-related behaviors may have significant effects on child bearers' current and future health and wellness.

Sleep health is one of the pillars of overall health and wellness. People's sleep-wake cycles are regulated by an internal process called the circadian rhythm. Biological functions, even at the cellular level, operate on a timing system throughout the day. This rhythm that keeps the body functioning is affected by exposures, like light, and also by behaviors, like diet and physical activity. Sleep is both affected by

this internal rhythm and also helps to regulate it. When people don't get the right amount of sleep, at the right time, on a regular basis, their biological functions are disrupted, which can eventually lead to disease development.

For instance, take postpartum depression, a persistent condition that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention approximates as many as one in eight new mothers experience. Researchers know that sleep deprivation and postpartum depression feed each other. In fact, when diagnosing postpartum depression, fatigue is one of the factors health care providers consider. The relationship between sleep and depression may seem obvious, but researchers are trying to pull apart that connection to understand it—and sleep during the postpartum period in general—to better inform care for child bearers.

Marquis Hawkins, PhD, assistant professor of epidemiology at the University of Pittsburgh's Graduate School of Public Health, has designed the SLEPT study to examine how sleep and physical activity affect postpartum health.



MARQUIS HAWKINS, PH.D.

"We know that sleep and sleep behaviors change after childbirth," says Dr. Hawkins. "But we don't really have documented information about those changes. Our goal with the SLEPT study is to characterize sleep after childbirth more comprehensively to identify specific targets for intervention."

In the SLEPT study, Dr. Hawkins is looking at more than just duration of sleep, the sole factor by which many people evaluate their sleep. In addition to duration, he describes looking at sleep health as "a multidimensional behavior characterized

by alertness, the ability to move through the day, regularity/consistent sleep patterns, personal satisfaction, the timing of sleep (sleeping at night as much as possible) and efficiency (whether people are able to sleep when they are trying to sleep)." The study also measures sleep behaviors, which include sleep hygiene, the daily routines and the environment in which people sleep. These behaviors also affect other health behaviors, like weight and depression, that are also important to health. Dr. Hawkins wants to understand how all those factors affect child bearers' health.

In his research, Dr. Hawkins has interviewed many mothers. These people often discuss how the focus on their health during pregnancy and shortly after childbirth shifts to the health of the infant and going to well-child visits.

"Well-child visits are obviously important and necessary," he says. "But child bearers still need attention and focus on their health. Symptoms for conditions like postpartum depression may not show up within the first six weeks after child-

birth, the typical time for a postpartum checkup. After this checkup, child bearers may not have another check-in with their health care provider for at least another year. So many things change in people's lives after giving birth, and they're often overlooked.

"With sleep, we often expect that no one sleeps after a child is born; that it's difficult, but it gets better. It's important to promote the idea that sleep issues after childbirth can be neither transient nor do they go away on their own. Poor sleep in the postpartum period is associated with developing depression, weight retention and other long-term trajectories of health that may increase the risk of disease development in the decades to come."

With the SLEPT study, focus returns to child bearers and how best to support their health and wellness in the postpartum period. To learn more about the SLEPT study, visit <https://pittplusme.org/studyarms/public-details?guid=c5987916-6b65-41ef-b1a2-cd68a3a4a993> or email marquis.hawkins@pitt.edu.