

What Happens After a First Episode of Postpartum Psychosis?

A meta-analysis indicates that almost two thirds of women have another psychotic episode, predominantly outside the postpartum period.

Postpartum psychosis denotes a severe mood disorder episode having psychotic, manic, or mixed affective symptoms and occurring within the first few weeks after childbirth. As new mothers and families facing this diagnosis need information on long-term prognosis, researchers conducted a review and meta-analysis covering six studies (mean follow-up in 645 of 954 patients with an index episode of postpartum psychosis, 16 years).

Overall, 36% of women had no further psychotic episodes; among the remainder (64%) who did have a subsequent episode, the majority (57%) experienced it outside the postpartum period. Among 336 women with a subsequent pregnancy, 27% had another episode associated with that pregnancy. In two studies, 66% of participants had good functional recovery. Limited data from three studies showed that 20 of 229 women committed suicide.

COMMENT

These findings suggest that postpartum psychosis may reflect either a lifelong mood disorder, probably with bipolar features, or an isolated mood disorder confined to the postpartum period (perhaps a subtype of the long-lasting form triggered in a certain neuroendocrine context). Roughly half of women with isolated postpartum psychosis had good functioning at follow-up. As almost three quarters of women with subsequent pregnancies did not experience further psychotic episodes, prophylactic lithium on the day of delivery may represent a sound preventive strategy that precludes the need to avoid future pregnancy. The suicide data, albeit limited, point to the need for careful clinical surveillance.

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Gilden J et al. Long term outcomes of postpartum psychosis: A systematic review and meta-analysis. J Clin Psychiatry 2020 Mar 10; 81:19r12906. (<https://doi.org/10.4088/JCP.19r12906>)