
POST NATAL MOOD

There's definitely a warm fuzzy feeling of being very special that goes with pregnancy. Despite that, it's common for a new mother to have feelings of 'baby blues' a day or two following the birth. Towards the end of pregnancy there is such anticipation for the baby to arrive, and a lot of attention from other people – whether it is being asked how long you still have to go, or being given a seat in a waiting room.

Oxytocin – the 'love' hormone



The birth itself comes with a surge in mother's hormones. One of these is oxytocin which creates a kind of 'high' that encourages mum to bond with her baby. But if she has had a long labour or stressful birthing experience, there can be a surge in stress hormones, too. Ideally following birth it is best for mum to sleep, but that can be hard if the baby is not sleeping, if her hormone are all over the place, if there are too many visitors, or she is still on a 'high' and forgets she needs to sleep. After a day or two, lack of sleep, fatigue from the birthing experience and decreasing hormone levels often begin to take their toll, leaving her feeling somewhat overwhelmed or low.

This is a very common experience and will usually pass after a few days of rest, recuperation and support from close friends and family. However, in some cases it can last longer. For the new mum this has been a huge transition into a new world that allows little time for self-

care. Sleep is disrupted, some may find it difficult to cook a nourishing meal and there can be feelings of guilt if she is finding it difficult to enjoy the new-born experience. This scenario is often seen in postpartum depression (PPD), with typical symptoms including tiredness, sadness, irritability and general disinterest in what is going on around. New mothers often feel guilty, anxious and worthless in relation to parenting. In worse case scenarios the mum may experience thoughts of suicide or causing harm to their baby. The DSM-IV defines PPD as beginning within 4 weeks after the birth, though it may not be diagnosed until 6 weeks to 3 months after baby arrives.



First of all, it is important to distinguish between PPD on one hand, and temporary low mood or baby blues immediately following the birth. Either way, If a client confides in you that they are feeling low, it is your responsibility to encourage them to make an appointment with their GP to let them know how they are feeling. As a health coach you can support your client with nourishing foods and appropriate lifestyle tips, but they may also need professional help from a psychiatrist or counselling therapist. Being an integrated coach means working comfortably in collaboration with other trained professionals.

What puts women at risk of developing PDD?

Factors such as previous mental health concerns, stress and financial strain, poor support socially, or a difficult birthing experience can put women at risk of developing PDD. Perhaps your client has a history of low mood, or experienced low mood in a previous pregnancy and is looking for ways to reduce their risk. You may have a client seeking support because they

are currently suffering from post-natal blues or mild PDD. For cases such as these we provide practical food and lifestyle tips below for you to consider when helping your client to formulate a suitable personalised plan for themselves.

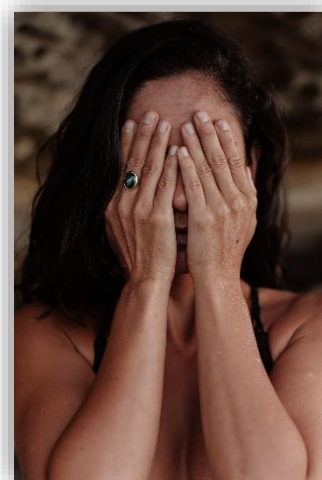
In this section we discuss certain nutrients, food combinations and lifestyle tips to support clients, particularly those susceptible to low mood. Ideally you will want to see your client while they are pregnant so you can start implementing some of these ideas, but they will still be beneficial if your client comes to you post pregnancy.



Balancing Blood Sugar

While dietary factors, particularly sugar and refined carb foods, have significant impact on blood glucose levels, so can stress, too, in its many forms. Stress can affect the body in so many ways. For example, emotional stress and lack of sleep can play havoc with hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol, with detrimental knock-on effects on blood sugar and insulin levels. Sugar, refined carbohydrate foods, stimulants such as caffeinated drinks, as well as emotional stress or lack of sleep will all raise levels of blood glucose, insulin, adrenaline and cortisol.

This is often accompanied by plummeting energy levels, while in susceptible people mood can be affected, too. Supporting your



client with stress management techniques (discussed further on) and dietary advice to balance blood sugar levels will help support their energy and mood.

Before even looking at specific nutrients that are vital for brain health it is vital to lay the groundwork first, and here are safe and effective ways to do that:

1. Minimise refined sugar

This often proves a tricky one to discuss and implement, as many new mums really feel they need some sugar for energy - and really enjoy a sweet treat! The same goes for coffee, which I will also discuss. Obviously you don't want to scare off your client by telling them they must give up all sugar! And certainly in some cultures, such as the Indian Ayurvedic approach, a little healthy sugar is recommended to aid recovery post pregnancy. Homemade treats are far better than shop bought versions as the quantity and quality of the sugar can be controlled.

One option might be to offer a few simple recipes for quick and healthy snack bars, try our *Cashew & Turmeric Bombs* (see the eBook for recipe) for your client or their partner to make. These are far more nutrient dense, with no rubbishy additives.



They can include unprocessed sugars such as dates, raisins and apricots (which also provide iron for energy) or maple syrup, good quality honey, molasses, dark muscovado sugar or coconut palm sugar – all a useful source of minerals.

Dark chocolate is another popular option, though the client may need to work up to this, so best start with 70% and perhaps work up to 85% - if they can take it! Try our *Crunchy Granola Choco Bark* (see the eBook for recipe).

2) Big, 'heroic' changes are not recommended

This goes for during either pregnancy or immediately afterwards. Simple changes over the first few months that are sustainable, quick and easy are really important, particularly if mum is breastfeeding and needs the extra calories, but has less time to prepare.

3) Including protein and healthy fats

Protein and fats in each meal and snack will greatly help to balance blood sugar levels, thereby supporting energy and mood. The pitfall I normally see with clients is a lack of protein and healthy fats at breakfast time and in snacks.

So give your client lots of tips on how to fortify meals and snacks with a handful of ground nuts or seeds tossed into a breakfast cereal, such as porridge, sugar-free muesli, Shredded Wheat or Weetabix.



Nuts and seeds are packed with important nutrients and make excellent and practical snacks. If mum prefers a biscuit or cake, encourage her to have it close to a meal that is rich in protein and fat rather than between meals with a coffee. That way the carbs will have less impact on her blood sugar levels.

Now we get into more detail about specific nutrients to support mood post pregnancy. We first cover the importance of omega 3 oils and vitamin D, then briefly discuss the B vitamins, magnesium, and trace minerals such as selenium, copper and zinc as part of an overall nutrient-dense, unprocessed diet.

Practical tips around nutrients, foods and lifestyle

1) Omega 3 oils

Research tells us that the long-chain omega 3 oils EPA and DHA, found in oily fish and fish oil supplements (or vegan version extracted from marine algae), reduce levels of key inflammatory cytokines such as TNF- α , IL-1 β , IL-6, and IL-8.



Since we now know that depression is characterised by an inflammatory state, this is likely to be one way these omega 3 oils can help regulate low mood – by their anti inflammatory actions. DHA, moreover, forms part of the actual structure of the brain. The brain is the fattiest organ in the body, so the right kinds of fats are vital for its structure and function. DHA is a major component of the baby’s brain as it grows and develops in the womb and after birth, but the problem is that mum has only a limited ability to manufacture DHA herself and pass it on to her growing offspring. In other words, without consuming any (or sufficient) DHA/EPA, she may be risking a deficiency for herself and the baby.

It is really important for the mother - particularly during pregnancy and breast feeding - to regularly consume oily fish (best option) or to take a fish oil supplement (or a vegan version)! Interestingly, this study shows that maternal stores of DHA can reduce by 50% during pregnancy and not return to pre-pregnancy levels until 6 months postpartum. There are many studies that show correlation between low levels of DHA and post natal depression. A study published in 2018 reported that low omega 3 status in early pregnancy was associated with a greater risk of post natal depression.

On the flip side, several studies have correlated higher fish intake or fish oil use in pregnancy with higher scores for their children on tests of intelligence and brain function in early childhood. So it seems that a diet rich in oily fish, or supplementing with fish oil, not only reduces the mother’s risk of suffering from post partum depression, but optimum levels during pregnancy will also support brain function in their offspring. Now, it’s all well and good to know what the important nutrients are, but how can you help the new mother to optimise her stores of DHA and EPA during pregnancy or afterwards?

- Firstly, recommend your client to consume oily fish (e.g. mackerel, herring, kippers, trout, sardines, salmon and anchovies) 2-3 times per week.



For example, baked salmon with pesto and roasted veg is a quick meal to prepare, while tinned salmon, sardines and mackerel are cheap and very easy to serve up with a warm wholemeal pitta, along with salad or oat cakes.

Anchovies can be added to a pizza or a bolognese sauce for extra flavour and nutrition.

- Plant sources of omega 3, such as flaxseeds (linseeds) and flax oil, chia seeds, walnuts and green leafy veg all provide some omega 3 in the form of ALA. However, it's important for clients to understand that most people have only a poor ability to convert ALA into the 'active' forms of omega 3 that are truly the vital oils for health, i.e. EPA and DHA.



- If your client simply will not eat oily fish they may need to consider a high quality fish oil supplement. Make sure you are aware of good quality oils that have a high percentage of EPA and DHA as opposed to just being a high strength fish oil. It is important to check the

ingredients and see the levels of EPA and DHA within the actual fish oil. Ideally, the oil has at least 1000mg of EPA and DHA combined per serving.

- If your client is allergic to fish, or is a vegan, make sure they are aware that several DHA/EPA products extracted from marine algae are now available as a plant-based alternative.

2) Vitamin D and sunlight



An article published in 2019 showed how three of the five studies reviewed that measured blood levels of vitamin D during the first or second trimester discovered an association between vitamin D deficiency and depressive symptoms postpartum A study on a Chinese cohort in 2015 where vitamin D levels were measured within 24 hours of giving birth showed that Serum vitamin D levels in women who developed no postpartum depression were significantly higher than those in women who did. Vitamin D exerts some of its effects by reducing proinflammatory cytokines, and as mentioned above a characteristic of depression is inflammation. Vitamin D may also be involved in preventing excessive cell death (called apoptosis), particularly in an area of the brain called the hippocampus. You can find evidence in this paper.

This study explains how vitamin D is also involved in producing the enzyme that converts tryptophan into serotonin – the ‘feel good’ neurotransmitter in the brain. Ideally, your client should ask their GP to check their levels of serum vitamin D either during pregnancy or postnatally. It is very common for people living in northern Europe to have insufficient levels of vitamin D, particularly during winter and early Spring. The problem is even more common

among those with darker skin tone, as they have a poorer ability to convert weak sunlight into vitamin D. There is very little vitamin D in the diet, so it is important for your client to supplement if their levels are low. Some fish oils contain a little vitamin D – so this would be a great way to include it. But the best way to get enough vitamin D is to enjoy some sunshine – though during pregnancy some women can find their skin is particularly sensitive to sun, especially if they are pale skinned.



Ten minutes in the sun when its high in the sky during the warmer months is ideal to get sufficient vitamin D. Individuals with darker skin will need somewhat longer than this. Exposing larger areas of skin is also beneficial, such as the neck and back. In addition, avoiding sunglasses for a time will allow sunlight to enter the eyes through the retina and into the brain to stimulate neurotransmitter production. Educate your client to see what they can manage, taking time of year and skin tone into account. In countries such as Ireland, vitamin D is recommended to newborns for their first 1-2 years. The healthcare system should also take into account the mother's vitamin D levels, not only to support brain health but also for regulating the immune system and for bone health.

Avoiding SAD – Seasonal Affective Disorder

Useful lifestyle advice for some clients is to purchase a light therapy box. These can be very beneficial, particularly for those who find their mood tends to be lower during the dark winter months, or if their baby is born in the winter and mum is confined indoors with little daylight.

A light therapy box produces bright, natural-spectrum light, and having it on while playing with baby on the floor, doing chores or next to the computer as you work can be a great way to lift the mood. Bright natural light causes chemical changes in the brain that lifts mood. It is usually recommended to be used during late autumn and winter within the first hour of waking for 20-30 minutes.

[Here is a link to more on light therapy](#)

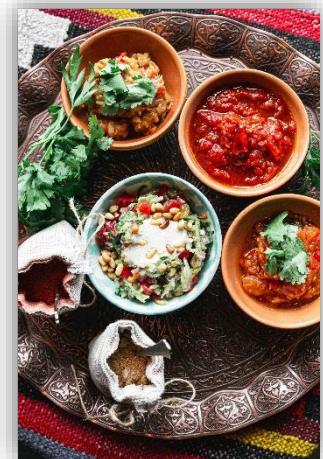
Note that a light box is no help for creating vitamin D in the skin!



3) Other Supporting Nutrients & Lifestyle Tips

Other nutrients that can be depleted during times of stress, compounding feelings of anxiety or low mood, include magnesium, B vitamins and antioxidants such as zinc and selenium. Eating a largely unprocessed diet will help to provide sufficient levels of most nutrients (vitamin D being the common exception, plus iodine in vegans or those who never eat fish, shellfish or sea vegetables). In addition, it may also be wise to suggest continuing or beginning an ante-natal multi vitamin/mineral product to help fill in any nutrient gaps in the diet or for additional needs due to different demands or genetic tendencies.

- Aim to add in lots of nutrient packed meals and snack ideas, such as soups and stews that can be batch cooked, and nutrient dense foods such as liver, eggs, fish, nuts / seeds, full fat dairy, avocado, olive oil & dark leafy greens. It often works better to talk about adding in healthy foods rather than asking a new mum simply to cut out all the junk – in other words, aim to ‘crowd out’ the bad stuff using nourishing, filling foods.
- Suggest to your client that if friends and family are looking for ways to support them, perhaps ask them to cook some meals that can be portioned and frozen. Some of the best



gifts I received post pregnancy were from friends arriving with meals or homemade snacks, or just healthier snacks bought from a health store.

- Magnesium can be particularly good if your client is finding it hard to wind down or sleep. Taking a bath or foot soak with Epsom salts (magnesium sulphate flakes) can be a great way to unwind – if mum can get someone to mind the baby!
- Another trace nutrient to consider with post natal depression is copper. Individuals with depression caused by excess copper tend to have high anxiety and are more likely to suffer postpartum depression in their child bearing years, according to biochemist Dr William Walsh, president of the US Walsh Research Institute and author of *Nutrient Power*, a pioneering book on mood disorders. Although copper is an essential nutrient, high levels can deplete zinc, so it might be useful to check levels of both copper and zinc, if possible. [Here is a link to a short article with a little more on this.](#)
- You can recommend your client to get blood tests done through a nutritional therapist, other Functional Medicine doctor, or their GP. However, many GPs may not be aware of William Walsh's research and the impact of copper on post natal mood.
- We have already talked about batch cooking and finding time to take a magnesium bath or a bath with some calming essentials oils such as lavender. However it is important that you help your client realise how important it is to take it easy – looking after themselves will allow them to take care of their baby properly. This type of 'selfish' is important and very positive!
- If they are tired, it is ok to say no to guests (they can leave food at the door!!!). And if close friends and family want to help, ask them to watch the baby while mum has a bath or a rest, or listens to relaxing music or a guided meditation.



- Remind your client that some convenience foods are perfectly fine, such as frozen peas, cauliflower and other frozen veg, rice, tinned beans, lentils and fish, bagged salads, pre chopped carrots and onions.... whatever it is that will make their life easier for the time being.
- Being home alone with a baby can feel very isolating. Other suggestions include joining a parent – baby group so they have somewhere to go and socialise in the day. Even better to join these groups while they are pregnant so they already know someone in it and know what to do once baby has arrived. Another great therapy for the mother is to talk with the midwife who attended the birth about the delivery.
- Being out in daylight and nature can have a very calming effect, and even when it is hard to get out the door with the baby we will always feel better for having done so! Babies love to be outside, too, and it sometimes stops them from crying.



- There are so many 'new mum' exercise classes geared to post pregnancy, and babies are welcome. Yoga can be a lovely gentle way to help the body recover again and is another great social outlet for making some new friends.
- Stubborn weight can also contribute to low mood, so your client might need help to reduce pressure on themselves to return to their former weight and shape. Remind them it took 9 months to make the baby, so to give themselves another 9 months or so to get back in shape. Breast feeding is of course an excellent way to help shift the weight while also toning up the uterus.
- Your client might also be open to working with a homeopath or herbalist who can recommend supportive remedies or essences to promote recovery post partum and help balance mood.

Hopefully within this section you have gained plenty of tips to support a client's mood post partum. However again please remember that with a client with post partum depression - as opposed to temporary 'baby blues' - it is vital that they also seek support through their GP and/ or a counsellor.