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BIPOLAR DISORDERS Factsheet

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What are the issues concerning parenthood for people with bipolar disorder?

The period between 18 and 30 years is when many women are diagnosed with bipolar disorder, and a time when many women have children. Having a mental illness is associated with an increased risk of problems related to pregnancy, childbirth and child rearing. These problems can lead to an increased risk of mood episodes. Medication use during pregnancy requires careful consideration of the mother's risk of relapse against the risk of harm or complications for the developing infant if medication is to be continued. However, there is currently very little evidence regarding the use of medications for bipolar disorder during pregnancy and the postpartum period.

What is the evidence regarding parenthood?

Moderate to low quality evidence suggests the median rate of mood episodes during pregnancy is around 24%, and around 37% in the postpartum period. Most mood episodes were depressive or mixed episodes. Women taking prophylactic medications during pregnancy or over the postpartum period had a lower relapse rates than women who were medication free.

Studies have found a small increased risk of heart defect or lower birth weight in infants exposed to antipsychotics in the womb, and a small increased risk of preterm delivery. Studies also found small effects of increased risk of neuromotor deficits in early childhood with exposure to antipsychotics in the womb. Review authors report that the studies did not routinely adjust for use of other medications or genetic predisposition, which could have accounted for these findings. No association was found between SSRI antidepressant exposure during pregnancy and autism spectrum disorders in the offspring.

For more information see the technical table

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NeuRA (Neuroscience Research Australia) is one of the largest independent medical and clinical research institutes in Australia and an international leader in neurological research.

Diseases of the brain and nervous system pose the greatest health, economic and social burden of any disease group because they are chronic, debilitating and have no known cures.

Medical research is the cornerstone of efforts to advance the health and wellbeing of families and the community. Our dedicated scientists are focussed on transforming their research into significant and practical benefits for all patients.

While we hope you find this information useful, it is always important to discuss any questions about bipolar disorder or its treatment with your doctor or other health care provider.