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POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER Factsheet

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What are trauma characteristics?

For a person to be diagnosed with PTSD, at least one trauma is required. Traumas as determined by the latest version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) include being exposed to threatened death, actual or threatened serious injury, or actual or threatened sexual violence. Examples are direct exposure, witnessing the trauma, or learning that a relative or close friend was exposed to trauma. Trauma characteristics, along with personal characteristics, influence the risk of developing PTSD following exposure.

What is the evidence for risk of PTSD following or during pregnancy and childbirth?

Moderate quality evidence found the prevalence of PTSD in community samples of prenatal women is around 3.3%, and postpartum PTSD was around 4%. Rates were higher in high-risk samples of women who had difficult births or pregnancies or had babies with fetal anomalies (prenatal PTSD = 18.95%, postpartum PTSD = 18.5%).

Moderate to high quality evidence found the pre-birth risk factors associated with PTSD (in descending order of effect) were depression in pregnancy, fear of childbirth, history of PTSD, poor health or complications, receiving counselling for pregnancy/birth, having previous psychological problems, less education, less social support, history of sexual trauma, ethnicity, history of any trauma, higher parity, planned pregnancy, and younger age. At-birth risk factors associated with PTSD were negative subjective birth experiences, an operative birth, lack of support from staff, negative emotions, dissociation, infant-related complications, lack of control or agency, pain, and short length of labour. Post-birth risk factors associated with PTSD were depression after childbirth, poor coping and stress, poor mental health, anxiety, and physical complications. No associations were found with marital status, socio-economic status, emotional health, time since birth, or presence of partner/companion at birth.

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 PTSD and its treatment with your doctor or other health care provider.