

OPAL-A Pearls

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Don't Miss Bipolar Disorder in the Perinatal Period

By Dr. Jacquelyn Knapp, Reproductive Psychiatrist and OPAL-A consultant

Clinical Scenario	<p>A 32-year-old woman, pregnant with her first child, presents to her obstetrician at 28 weeks' gestation. She reports that in the past month, she's had episodes of low mood, tearfulness and insomnia. Upon further questioning, she reveals that there are days when she feels highly anxious, needs little sleep, experiences racing thoughts and periods of irritability alternating with moments of intense energy and grandiose plans for the baby's arrival. Her partner describes her as unusually talkative, often jumping from one idea to another, and notes she has started multiple ambitious projects at home but abandoned them midway. She has no prior psychiatric diagnosis but recalls periods in her early twenties when she was more outgoing and impulsive than usual.</p>
What the Research Indicates	<p>Bipolar disorder is often underrecognized during pregnancy and postpartum—yet early identification is critical. Among women with a previous bipolar diagnosis, over 50% experience a new mood episode during the perinatal period (51.4% in pregnancy, 54.8% postpartum). In women with no prior psychiatric history, 2.6% meet criteria for bipolar disorder when assessed with structured interviews, and up to 20% report bipolar-spectrum symptoms. These findings indicate that the perinatal period may reveal previously undiagnosed bipolar disorder.</p>
Conclusion	<p>Misdiagnosis as unipolar depression risks inappropriate antidepressant use and serious complications like mania or postpartum psychosis.</p>

Recommendation

It is essential to assess for any history of manic or hypomanic episodes, particularly prior to initiating antidepressant therapy.

For further discussion on management and next steps, contact OPAL-A at 1-855-966-7255 or 503-346-1000. OPAL-A now also provides e-consults. For details on how to place an e-consult, see <https://www.ohsu.edu/health/epiccare-link-health-care-providers>

References



Masters GA, et al. Prevalence of bipolar disorder in perinatal women: A systematic review and meta-analysis. J Clin Psychiatry. 2021;82(1):20r13420.

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/35830616/>