



# CARE PATHWAY FOR THE MANAGEMENT OF PERINATAL MENTAL HEALTH

This Care Pathway provides a recommended approach for the identification, assessment and monitoring of mental health issues for pregnant and postpartum people in Ontario.  
This tool **does not replace individualized assessment, and clinical judgment is required** to ensure safe, effective, equitable and inclusive treatment of your patient.

## 1. ASK ABOUT THE WELL-BEING OF THE PREGNANT OR POSTPARTUM PERSON AT EVERY VISIT TO IDENTIFY THE NEED FOR MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT AND TREATMENT

- Ask about mood and well-being of the pregnant or postpartum person at each visit and consider input from patient’s circle of care. Assessment Tools can be used, including the Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD-7), Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9) and Edinburgh Perinatal/Postnatal Depression Scale (EPDS) (see table below).
- Initiate a dialogue to understand the context of the person’s mental health within their own unique situation with a lens on equity, diversity and inclusion.
- Identify factors that precipitate or exacerbate mental health symptoms (e.g., lack of support, financial difficulties, domestic violence, alcohol or substance use disorders, etc.).

## 3. ASSESS THE SEVERITY OF THE MENTAL HEALTH CONCERN

## 4. ASSIST BY RECOMMENDING OR IMPLEMENTING A TREATMENT STEP (SEE DETAILS ON PAGE 2)

	MILD	MODERATE	SEVERE	URGENT
<b>ASSESS</b> Severity and Symptom Level	Mild or few, but persistent symptoms, minimal impact on day-to-day function	Multiple symptoms, persistent, impacting day-to-day function and quality of life	Many symptoms, persistent, significant impact on day-to-day function and quality of life	Psychosis, mania, or risk of harm to self or others
<b>Assessment Tools (Depression &amp; Anxiety ONLY)*</b>				
GAD-7 (Anxiety)	Score = 5-9	Score = 10-14	Score = 15 or more	Not applicable
PHQ-9 (Depression)	Score = 5-9	Score = 10-14	Score = 15 or more or Q9 > 0	Intent or plan for suicide
EPDS (Depression and Anxiety)	Score = 10-12	Score = 13-18	Score = 19 or more or Q10 > 0	Intent or plan for suicide
<b>ASSIST</b> Initial Suggested Treatment Step	<b>Treatment Step 1</b> (If <b>very mild</b> , can monitor and reassess at 2-4 week intervals)	<b>Treatment Step 2</b>	<b>Treatment Step 2 or 3</b>	<b>Treatment Step 4</b>

\*Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9), Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD-7), Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale (EPDS) – Scores are a guide only, clinical assessment is required.

## 5. ARRANGE FOLLOW-UPS TO MONITOR RECOMMENDED TREATMENT PLAN. MAKE MODIFICATIONS OR CHANGES TO TREATMENT STEP AS REQUIRED

- Address barriers to treatment uptake, review risk factors and discuss progress to determine whether new level of Treatment Step is required.
- Frequency of initial follow-up should be at minimum every two weeks during active treatment phase (12 weeks). More frequent contact may be required if there is a higher severity of illness or medication is prescribed, and may be less frequent as symptoms improve. Be clear about which health professional is providing follow-up care.
- Use the assessment tools to monitor symptoms. Scores on a GAD-7 <5, PHQ-9 <5 or EPDS <10 on at least two assessments that are at least two weeks apart suggest remission.
- Follow patient to remission. Follow the individual on medication treatment for at least six months or longer after remission to assess need for ongoing treatment.

The pathway was modelled after the **5A’s Construct** (Goldstein, Whitlock, & DePue, 2004). Please refer to the [guidance document](#) for full list of references. The *Care Pathway* is meant to be clinically applicable for a wide range of populations. Ontario has diverse pregnant and postpartum populations and this can greatly influence individual needs and mental health care expectations. When appropriate, health professionals should consult with specialized organizations dedicated to the support of specific populations when tailoring the *Care Pathway* to the person’s unique needs.

# TREATMENT STEPPED-CARE APPROACH

A person can enter at any step in the Care Pathway and move up or down based on severity of illness and response to prior interventions. Treatments can build upon interventions available in the lower steps. Regardless of the treatment step being applied, continuous monitoring is required. Note: both public and private fee service options are provided below for a full list of options.

TREATMENT STEP	FOCUS OF INTERVENTION	INTERVENTIONS BY TYPE AND RECOMMENDED RESOURCES		
<b>TREATMENT STEP 1</b> Psychosocial Interventions (Community Support)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Common mental health concerns such as depression or anxiety, where symptoms are <b>mild or subclinical</b> (may include patients for whom you are taking a watch-and-wait approach).</li> </ul>	<b>Self-help (perinatal-specific)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Self-directed workbooks for depression                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><a href="#">Managing Depression</a></li> <li><a href="#">Coping with Depression during Pregnancy and Following the Birth</a></li> </ul> </li> <li>Self-directed workbooks for anxiety                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><a href="#">Coping with Anxiety during Pregnancy and Following the Birth</a></li> <li><a href="#">The Pregnancy &amp; Postpartum Anxiety Workbook</a></li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<b>Guided self-help</b> (e.g., internet- or paper-based self-guided intervention that may include assistance from trained coach) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><a href="#">Bounce Back Ontario postpartum specific resources</a> (online, self and physician referral accepted)</li> </ul>	<b>Peer support</b> (e.g., mother-to-mother support) and <b>Supportive Counselling</b> (e.g., public health nurse visits, facilitated support groups) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><a href="#">Postpartum Support International</a> (Ontario-specific resources)</li> <li><a href="#">Healthy Babies, Healthy Children</a> (online/in-person, by region)</li> </ul>
<b>TREATMENT STEP 2</b> Psychological Interventions (self or health care provider referral) and Antidepressant Medication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Common mental health concerns of <b>mild severity that do not remit</b> with Step 1 interventions AND</li> <li>Common mental health concerns of <b>moderate severity or greater</b>.</li> </ul>	<b><a href="#">Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)</a> and <a href="#">Interpersonal Psychotherapy (IPT)</a> are first-line treatments for perinatal depression and anxiety</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><a href="#">Mother Matters</a>: Online therapist-facilitated discussion board and therapy group for postpartum depression/anxiety (free in Ontario)</li> <li><a href="#">BEACON digital therapy</a>, <a href="#">AbilitiCBT</a>: Internet-based CBT (free in Ontario, therapist available with perinatal expertise)</li> </ul>	<b>Additional Resources:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><a href="#">Postpartum Support International</a> (for public and private services)</li> <li>Local resources (e.g., Family Health Teams, <a href="#">Ontario Structured Psychotherapy Program</a>, private services)</li> <li><a href="#">211Ontario</a> (online Ontario database)</li> <li><a href="#">ConnexOntario</a> (online mental health database)</li> </ul>	<b>Additional Resources:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><a href="#">Canadian Network for Mood and Anxiety Treatments</a></li> <li>Information on antidepressants in pregnancy and lactation: <a href="#">MotherToBaby</a>, <a href="#">LactMed</a></li> </ul>
<b>TREATMENT STEP 3</b> Additional Specialized Interventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Mild or moderate mental health concerns that do not remit with Step 2</b></li> <li><b>Severe mental health concerns</b> (e.g., severe depression, bipolar disorder or schizophrenia)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provider to Psychiatrist e-consultation for support around treatment recommendations: <a href="#">Ontario Telemedicine Network</a></li> <li>Refer to specialized perinatal program for direct patient-provider consultation (Check lists at <a href="#">Public Health Units in Ontario</a>)</li> <li>Refer to local acute care institution for somatic treatment (neuro-stimulation, electroconvulsive therapy) or for partial (day program) or full hospitalization</li> </ul>	<b>Additional Resources:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Additional medication options (see <a href="#">Canadian Network for Mood and Anxiety Treatments</a>)</li> <li>When specialized perinatal mental health care is unavailable, refer to local hospital specialty psychiatric services for specialized psychotherapy and pharmacological management and follow-up</li> </ul>	
<b>TREATMENT STEP 4</b> Urgent Care and Hospitalization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Suspected mania or psychosis</li> <li>Discloses intention or plan for suicide, self-harm or harm to fetus/infant</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Immediate Action: Urgent Risk assessment – Safety First.</b> A person with possible mania, psychosis and/or thoughts of harming self or baby should NOT be left alone or with baby until an appropriate assessment is complete. Many pregnant and postpartum individuals do have “intrusive” thoughts of harm coming to their baby with no “active” intent. Each provider will have a different level of comfort with this assessment.</li> <li>Provider is concerned about mania, psychosis or harm to self or others: Initiate plan to transfer patient for emergency psychiatric assessment. MDs can complete an Ontario application for extended assessment (<a href="#">Form 1 Mental Health Act</a>). Call emergency services as needed to ensure safe transport for patient to the closest emergency department. Call local Children’s Aid Society/Family and Children’s Services if concern about harm to child.</li> <li>Provider assesses that there is no active intent or plan for harm to self or others, and that patient has appropriate support, as well as capacity to access crisis services if symptoms worsen acutely: Mobilize patient’s support system; Ensure the individual has contact information for crisis services; Maintain close follow-up, follow treatment Steps 2 and 3 as appropriate.</li> <li>Maintain and update plan of action with patient and patient’s support system, including providers in patient’s circle of care.</li> </ul>		



**Your feedback is important!** The Provincial Council for Maternal and Child Health is dedicated to improving the usability of this tool and the accompanying [guidance document](#). We encourage healthcare providers using this tool to submit feedback via an online survey by scanning the QR code or [clicking the link online here](#).