

Getting help

Your midwife needs to know about your fears, so they can provide extra care and support and ensure that birth education is helpful and does not increase your anxiety.

You can ask for a referral to a mental health professional. If you are a patient at KEMH, you can ask for a referral to the Department of Psychological Medicine. At Psychological Medicine, we will work with you, to assess your fears and develop a plan to help you to manage your fears and anxiety symptoms, and help you prepare psychologically for your birth. We will also work with your obstetric team to increase your level of support.

If you are not a patient at KEMH, you can discuss your fears and anxiety with your GP, who can refer you to a psychologist in your local area. Medicare now provides rebates for up to 12 sessions per year for treatment of diagnosed anxiety disorders and/or phobias.

It is also important to share your fears and anxieties with your partner, family and friends, as they can provide essential support.

If you need help:

Contact Psychological Medicine, King Edward Memorial Hospital on (08) 9340 1521 and speak with the Duty Officer or (if you are not a patient of KEMH) speak with your GP.

With the right help, the goal is for you to have a less fearful and more satisfying birth experience.

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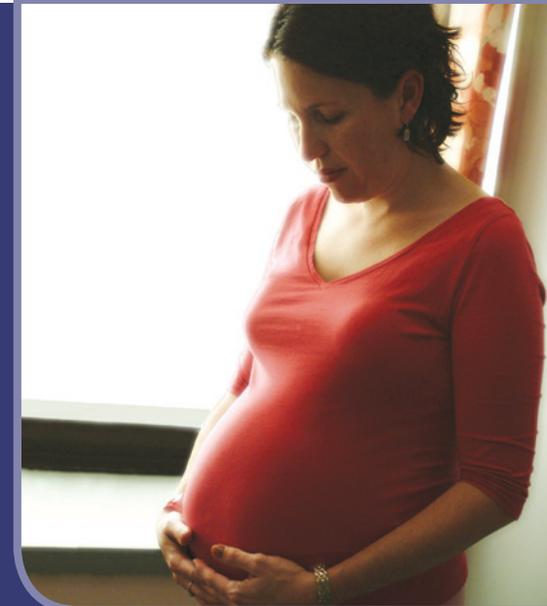
Government of Western Australia
Department of Health



Delivering a Healthy WA

Fear of Childbirth

PSYCHOLOGICAL MEDICINE



Some fear of childbirth is normal for most women, especially for first-time mothers. For some women this fear is so extreme it requires professional help.

Where fear of childbirth is extreme, with ongoing anxiety and a strong desire to avoid pregnancy or childbirth, and it impacts on day-to-day life, it is likely that this fear may be a phobia known as Tokophobia.

Signs and Symptoms

Some common fears for women facing childbirth include:

- Fear of harm occurring to the baby
- Fear of harm occurring to themselves
- Fear of pain during labour and delivery

Often women who have a severe or phobic fear of childbirth (Tokophobia) will find it difficult to express or explain their fear.

Signs and symptoms of a severe or phobic fear of childbirth (Tokophobia) may include:

- Distress and anxiety when the pregnancy is confirmed.
- Increased distress and anxiety in the last trimester, with the approaching labour and delivery.
- Anxiety symptoms (such as not sleeping, bad dreams, rapid heartbeat, tension, stomach pains, and panic symptoms).
- Changes in eating habits (overeating or loss of appetite).
- Feelings of being trapped, irritable, stressed, restless and nervous.

- Loneliness and feeling others do not understand these fears and generally feeling unsupported.
- Negative thoughts about being abnormal and doubts about being able to give birth.
- Constant thoughts about the labour and delivery (sometimes with attempts to avoid or block these thoughts).
- Not wanting to talk about birth and/or avoiding birth education classes or antenatal appointments.

Together these feelings, thoughts and anxiety symptoms are likely to impact on daily life, with many women finding it difficult to do everyday tasks. There is often an impact on relationships, for example, strain on relationships with partners.

What causes severe fear of childbirth or Tokophobia?

No one knows the answer, but the cause is likely to involve many factors.

The following factors may increase risk of developing a severe or phobic fear (Tokophobia) of childbirth:

- A personal history of anxiety disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), phobias, or mood disorders such as depression.
- A family history of anxiety disorders.
- Having an anxious personality or a tendency to worry.
- Being anxious and hearing 'horror stories' about childbirth.

- A background of trauma, in particular childhood sexual abuse and/or childbirth-related PTSD.
- Other risk factors include low self-esteem, difficult social circumstances, i.e. severe financial difficulties, limited social support, a history of poor relationships, and/or having an 'anxious' partner, who also has a severe fear of childbirth.

What helps?

Women with severe fear of childbirth and Tokophobia need:

- Understanding
- Extra care and support
- Professional help

The first step is to identify if you need help.

1. Ask yourself - On a scale of 0 (being no fear) and 10 (being extreme fear) "How afraid are you of childbirth?" If your answer is greater than 7, you may be at risk of having a severe fear or phobic fear (Tokophobia) of childbirth.

2. Then ask yourself - Do I have any of the signs and symptoms or risk factors identified above?

3. If you recognise that you have a severe fear or Tokophobia, take action straight away: You may have the urge to avoid the issue, but it is important to tell others about your fears. Getting help early in your pregnancy can make a big difference.