

Case Study #11. Premature discontinuation of treatment

The patient is a 26-year-old woman who initially presented to you at her 6-week postpartum medical visit. At that time, she had a score of 19 on the Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale (EPDS), and your clinical exam indicated that she was depressed and in need of treatment. She was reluctant to take medication, but she agreed to an antidepressant trial. At follow-up visits 2 and 4 weeks later, her depression improved substantially. At a visit 8 weeks later (about 3–4 months postpartum), she reported that she was still tired, but that her depressive symptoms were resolved.

She was scheduled to see you again 4 weeks after that, but did not show for that appointment. She has called your nurse today and stated that she was depressed again and apparently had stopped taking her medication soon after her 8 week follow-up without telling you that she had done so.

Questions

1. What is your next step in managing this patient?

You should have your nurse contact her to schedule an appointment as soon as possible. Your evaluation should include a repeat of the EPDS, and a review of your clinical exam for depression and for suicidal thoughts and thoughts of hurting her baby.

2. The patient's EPDS score is now 20, and she is clearly depressed but not suicidal. What treatment should you recommend?

It appears that the patient's relapse is likely due to noncompliance with premature discontinuation of the antidepressant medication. Since she had a good response to the initial medication, it should be restarted. You should ask her about side effects to determine if that influenced her discontinuation. If that was the reason for stopping, then another antidepressant can be considered.

3. What should you tell the patient about duration of treatment?

It is common practice to have patients with postpartum depression continue their medication for at least 6 months to a year. You should mention that she is at high risk for relapse if she stops the medication before that point. You should also instruct her to inform you if she makes any change in the use of the medication, and not to stop on her own. You should also inform her that antidepressant medications should be tapered when they are discontinued.

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