

## PARENTING WITH LISA SALMON



### Dads suffer postnatal depression

POSTNATAL depression in new dads is not something generally talked about. A US researcher has now highlighted the possible biological causes, as well as how to deal with the problem.

Dr Darby Saxbe, an assistant professor at the University of Southern California's psychology department, has just led a study into parents' biological responses in the early months of a child's life.

She cites an example of a typical question from a new mum, about her husband's health since the birth of their child:

"I've got a two-month-old baby and my husband has become increasingly bad-tempered and stressed since she was born.

"Is this likely to be some kind of postnatal depression, and what can we do about it?"

Dr Darby says: "It's common to feel tired, stressed, and short-tempered in early parenthood.

You've got a tiny creature waking you up every few hours, demanding to be held and fed and your pre-baby life and self are forever changed.

"Who wouldn't be overwhelmed? We often hear about the bliss of welcoming a new baby, but less often about how exhausting, lonely and frustrating those first few months can be.

"Postnatal depression can affect both mothers and fathers, and may be biologically-based."

Dr Darby's research team recently published a study which found men with lower testosterone reported more depressive symptoms during the postpartum - following the birth of a child - period.

"Testosterone tends to drop in men during the transition to parenthood," she says, "which may help explain why depression risk increases during this time."

She adds: "If your husband seems particularly hopeless and sad, isn't enjoying activities that usually give him pleasure, and can't be cheered up, then he may be depressed."

Looking after yourself and keeping as healthy as possible is vital at this time, she stresses.

"The first line of defence is taking good care of yourself.

"Sleep, exercise, and socialising are all very well known to reduce the risk of depression, so encourage your partner to prioritise healthy habits to stay as well as possible."

It is important to be alert to any signs that all is not well in your partner and to be aware of how he can help himself, and of other help that is available.

Adds Dr Darby: "If his mood doesn't lift, talk therapy can be very effective for depression, particularly research-supported treatments like cognitive-behavioural therapy."

# 'I WANT TO GIVE THE READERS COURAGE'

Meet our new doctor – Dr Zak Uddin is a GP who has also written his first novel. He will be writing a weekly topical column on health issues and answering readers' questions too. MAXINE GORDON books in for a first consultation

**N**OT many GPs will admit to having written a "trashy" novel. But Dr Zak Uddin is no ordinary GP.

In fact, he was a surgeon for five years before he switched to general practice. And he has just published his first novel, *From Cradle To Grave*, about a junior doctor falling for a beautiful nurse.

"People probably say my book is trash!" he says with a laugh. "It is written for the female audience who enjoy a romance. It is about the life of a junior doctor and how people support you through your fledgling career."

It has been self-published at the cost of £2,000 and available through Amazon.

Writing has held a longstanding interest for the medic, who also produces a health blog for professionals.

And he is particularly keen to write on health issues for the general public – particularly when there is so much sensationalism and misinformation in the media and online regarding illness.

"I hope to communicate in an unambiguous and friendly way and give readers a greater



**CALLING:** Dr Zak Uddin switched to general practice from being a surgeon because he enjoyed the successful interaction with patients

understanding of their health," he says. "If they have a worrying symptom, I want to give them courage to approach their GP knowing they won't be ridiculed."

Dr Zak – as he likes to be known – is 36 years old and married to a Yorkshire lass and they are expecting their first child in January. He will be answering your health questions every week as well as writing on a topical issue.

A graduate from the University of Manchester, his first job was in a small hospital in the Lakes. He switched from surgery into general practice because he felt it suited him better. "I enjoy the successful interaction with patients, often supporting them

at difficult times in their lives," he says.

Medicine, he adds, seemed the natural pathway: his father and aunt both trained as medics. As a teenager, he thought the world of medicine seemed glamorous, but the reality is something else.

"In reality, it's darn hard work. You have to comfort people when things go wrong and when everybody is up in the air you have to be the one person who stays calm."

There are a myriad of pressures on GPs today, but the doctor says you should not put off seeking a consultation if you are worried about your health. Most patients, he notes, are fearful of cancer,

and yet our biggest killer is heart disease.

"People ignore chest pain, but are afraid of cancer," he says.

And yet, many people refuse to take up the offer of free health screening for the likes of breast, bowel, and cervical cancer and cardiovascular wellbeing.

"Being aware of symptoms is very important, but it goes hand in hand with health screening."

● Read Dr Zak's first column next week. Below, he answers some readers' questions. If you have a question for him, please email [askdoctorzak@gmail.com](mailto:askdoctorzak@gmail.com); visit [www.doctorzak.co.uk](http://www.doctorzak.co.uk) or follow him on Twitter @AskDoctorZak

## Ask Dr Zak: Heartburn and smoking

**Q: I have really bad heartburn, and had tried everything I can buy without any improvement. I've put off going to my GP as I've heard that I'll need a camera down my throat and the thought of this terrifies me – Stephanie, aged 49**

**A:** It sounds like you are suffering with gastro oesophageal reflux disease, commonly referred to as heartburn. It is important that you see your GP, because, as you say, your symptoms are not improving. Acid reflux is incredibly common, and is often easily treated with medications that reduce the amount of acid in the stomach. However, occasionally heartburn can be

due to a stomach ulcer, and in very rare cases, cancer of the gullet or stomach. If your GP doesn't think this is the case, he or she will most likely start you on a medication and ask you to return for review in three to four weeks. Camera tests are reserved for if there is a suggestion of something worrying going on, or if a trial of treatment does not improve your symptoms. They can be done under light sedation, and most people tolerate this very well.

**Q: I'm really keen to stop smoking, but have tried and failed quite a few times. I've smoked since my teens and am really keen to stop. Do you think an**

**e-cigarette would help – Derek, aged 54**

**A:** Congratulations on your desire to stop smoking. As you say, it isn't easy and indeed many people try and fail several times before successfully becoming ex-smokers. Largely it is never too late to quit, and you'll likely see benefits almost immediately. I would recommend that you initially attend your local Stop Smoking service, as this is set up not only to provide you with medications, but also the support of a trained nurse, who will guide you through the 12-week plan. If this doesn't appeal to you, or you've tried this before, an e-cigarette is less harmful than

tobacco, and I would recommend this over continuing to smoke. However it is important that you stop cigarettes completely, and ideally you should also set a date when you want to give up e-cigarettes too.

● If you have a question for Dr Zak, please email: [askdoctorzak@gmail.com](mailto:askdoctorzak@gmail.com). Dr Uddin's advice is provided in good faith and in accordance with currently accepted evidence. However, this content is not intended to be a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. You should always seek the advice of a GP, or other qualified health provider, regarding a medical condition.