

Premature births linked to physical abuse

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Premature birth can have serious effects on the development and growth of children. In many parts of the world, preterm deliveries are increasing in frequency. In a study published in the February 2008 issue of the *American Journal of Obstetrics & Gynecology*, researchers from the University of Porto Medical School and the Hospital S. João, Porto, Portugal, found that there was a strong link between physical abuse during pregnancy and premature births.

Using a well-validated questionnaire, the Abuse Assessment Screen, 2660 Caucasian women consecutively delivered of singleton births at the Hospital S. João were surveyed to assess their experiences during pregnancy. This survey captured demographic, behavioral and obstetric data, including the type and frequency of physical abuse, if any.

Twenty-four percent of mothers of preterm newborn infants had experienced physical abuse during pregnancy compared with 8% of mothers of term newborn infants. Violence was associated with preterm birth even after controlling for age, marital status, education, income, parity, planned pregnancy, antenatal care, smoking, alcohol, and illicit drugs use.

Writing in the article, Teresa Rodrigues, MD, states, “The main strengths of this study are its large sample size, the high participation rate; the inclusion of women from virtually all social and economic strata and a broad range of pregnancy and delivery risk profiles. Assessment of violence exposure took place with guaranteed privacy, through face-to-face interviews that used highly trained personnel.” She emphasizes that

women are not generally evaluated during pregnancy for physical abuse and that this study suggests that physicians should recognize such abuse as a risk factor for preterm delivery and address this issue with patients.

Source: Elsevier Health Sciences

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