

Mother's depression a risk factor in childhood asthma symptoms, study suggests

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This is investigator Kristin Riekert, Ph.D., from Johns Hopkins. Credit: Johns Hopkins Medicine

Maternal depression can worsen asthma symptoms in their children, according to research from Johns Hopkins Children's Center published online in the *Journal of Pediatric Psychology*.

Analyzing data from interviews with 262 mothers of African-American [children](#) with asthma — a population disproportionately affected by this inflammatory airway disorder — the Hopkins investigators found that children whose mothers had more depressive symptoms had more frequent asthma symptoms during the six-months of the study.

Conversely, children whose mothers reported fewer depressive symptoms had less frequent asthma symptoms.

Researchers tracked ups and downs in [maternal depression](#) as related to the frequency of symptoms among children.

"Even though our research was not set up to measure just how much a mom's depression increased the frequency of her child's symptoms, a clear pattern emerged in which the latter followed the earlier," says senior investigator Kristin Riekert, Ph.D., a pediatric psychologist and co-director of the Johns Hopkins Adherence Research Center.

But while maternal depression appeared to aggravate a child's asthma, the opposite was not true: How often a child had symptoms did not seem to affect the mother's [depressive symptoms](#), an important finding that suggests maternal depression is an independent risk factor that can portend a child's symptoms, researchers say.

Past studies have shown that children with chronic health conditions fare worse if their primary caregiver is depressed, but none have teased out the exact interplay between the two.

"Intuitively, it may seem that we're dealing with a chicken-egg situation, but our study suggests otherwise," Riekert says. "The fact that mom's depression was not affected by how often her child had symptoms really caught us off guard, but it also suggested which factor comes first."

Researchers did not study why and how a mother's depression affects a child's asthma status, but because depression often involves fatigue, memory lapses and difficulty concentrating, it can affect a parent's ability to manage the child's chronic condition, which can involve daily, and sometimes complex, drug regimens and frequent visits to the doctor.

"Mom is the one who must implement the doctor's recommendations for treatment and follow-up, and if she is depressed she can't do it well, so the child will suffer," says lead investigator Michiko Otsuki, Ph.D., a behavioral medicine fellow at Johns Hopkins at the time of the study, now at the University of South Florida St. Petersburg.

Investigators say their findings should prompt pediatricians who treat children with asthma to pay close attention to the child's primary caregiver — whether or not it is the mother — and screen and refer them for treatment if needed.

"We ask these parents if they are smokers all the time, so maybe it's time to start asking them if they are coping well emotionally," said co-investigator Arlene Butz, Sc.D., a pediatric asthma specialist at Johns Hopkins Children's Center. "Doctors are trained to pick up on subtle clues, so if they see a red flag in mom, they should follow-up with a depression screener and referral if needed."

Treating depressed mothers whose children are at high-risk for asthma complications will likely benefit both mother and child, researchers say, while providing a clear treatment target to help reduce the burden of asthma in the United States. Asthma is the country's leading pediatric chronic illness, affecting 6.5 million children under the age of 18, according to the CDC.

The Hopkins study included only mothers but investigators believe a similar pattern would emerge regardless of who the primary caregiver is.

Researchers caution that the [mothers](#) in their study were screened for depression with a standard questionnaire, which is a reliable detector of symptoms but not a firm diagnosis.

The Hopkins findings came from a high-risk, inner-city population and

thus cannot be statistically extended to other ethnic and socioeconomic groups, but researchers say the effect of caregiver [depression](#) on a child's [asthma](#) likely transcends demographics.

Source: Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions

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