

# Canadian teen moms run higher risk of abuse, depression than older mothers

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(Edmonton) Teen mothers are far more likely to suffer abuse and postpartum depression than older moms, according to a study of Canadian women's maternity experiences by a University of Alberta researcher.

Dawn Kingston, an assistant professor in the Faculty of Nursing, analyzed data from the Maternity Experiences Survey, which asked more than 6,400 [new mothers](#) about their experiences with stress, violence, pre- and postnatal care, breastfeeding and [risky behaviour](#) like smoking and drug use before, during and after pregnancy.

Kingston said the survey offers the first nationwide view of maternity experiences and many [risk factors](#) affecting maternal and [infant health](#). Knowing that teens are most at risk of abuse and depression, for example, helps [public health policy](#) makers and providers target care and support where it's needed most, she said.

"If we don't intervene early, the abuse and depression can continue into the [postpartum period](#) and the child's early developmental years," she said. "Women that have [mental health issues](#) in pregnancy and postpartum have children that are at greater risk of having [mental health problems](#) and developmental problems."

The study, published in the May issue of *Pediatrics*, compared maternity experiences of women at various ages: teens (15 to 19 years), [young adults](#) (20 to 24) and adults (25 and older).

The data showed that 41 per cent of teen moms had experienced [physical abuse](#) in the previous two years—double the rate among women in their early 20s and five times that among adult women.

"We had no idea that the risk was as high as it is in adolescents," Kingston said.

Nearly a quarter of teens indicated they had been abused more than three times during that span. One-fifth said they'd been abused by a family member, compared with 14 per cent of young adults and 9.5 per cent of adult women.

Some 14 per cent of teens experienced symptoms of postpartum depression, compared with 9.3 per cent of women in their early 20s and 6.9 per cent of adult women.

Such results suggest a need for screening for depression and violence among pregnant women, Kingston said. Few pregnant and postpartum women are routinely screened for violence at present in Canada, something that is mandatory in Australia and the U.K.

"Women often don't tell their provider they're suffering, whether it's depression or domestic abuse," she said. "That's why there needs to be a routine screening process. If you don't screen, the need may not be identified and women are not linked to resources like counselling and other help that's available."

## **Teens later to start prenatal care**

The data also showed that teen moms were more likely to start prenatal care late, more likely to engage in risky behaviour like smoking, and less likely to breastfeed.

Some 15.5 per cent of teen moms started prenatal care late, double the rate for moms in their 20s and nearly four times that for adult mothers.

Fewer teens reported initiating breastfeeding than older women. Just 19 per cent breastfed for three months or more, compared with 30 per cent of moms in their 20s and 41 per cent of adult women.

Teens were also far more likely to smoke during and after pregnancy (29 per cent and 50.9 per cent, respectively) than women in their 20s (23.6 per cent and 33.9 per cent) and adult women (7.8 per cent and 12.7 per cent).

Such results might not be surprising given the nature of unplanned teen pregnancies, but the high smoking rates among young adults was a surprise, Kingston said, as was the decision of moms to continue smoking after delivery.

"That suggests there's considerable opportunity for teaching, identifying needs and linking women to services they need through prenatal and postpartum care."

Provided by University of Alberta

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