

# Is there a link between postpartum depression and the 'love hormone'?

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UNC researchers are launching a 5-year study aimed at understanding the role of oxytocin in postpartum depression and bonding between mothers and babies.

Is there a link with postpartum depression and [oxytocin](#), which is sometimes called the "love hormone"?

Three researchers at the University of North Carolina School of Medicine are starting a 5-year study, funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH), that's aimed at understanding the role of oxytocin in postpartum depression and bonding between mothers and babies.

The new 5-year study is based on a smaller study published recently in the *Journal of Women's Health*.

"The [conventional wisdom](#) is that breastfeeding reduces postpartum

depression—yet we see tremendous overlap between moms who struggle with breastfeeding and moms who have postpartum depression or [anxiety symptoms](#)," said Alison Stuebe, MD, first author of the pilot study and assistant professor in UNC's Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology. She is also assistant professor in the Department of [Maternal and Child Health](#) in the UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health.

"In this study, we measured levels of oxytocin, the 'love hormone', in mothers with mild anxiety or depression and in normal controls. The mothers who were more anxious had lower oxytocin levels during breastfeeding. We can't tell from this study whether feeling anxious reduces oxytocin, or whether not having enough oxytocin causes anxiety, but the results suggest that the two problems are connected. It may be that a problem with oxytocin both contributes to postpartum [depression symptoms](#) and makes breastfeeding less enjoyable," Stuebe said.

**More information:** [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23586800](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23586800)

Provided by University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Medicine

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