

# When a baby dies, parents' health could be at risk

October 9 2013, by Marlen Mursuli

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Approximately one third of parents who experience the death of an infant go on to suffer from clinical depression or clinical post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) up to 13 months after the event, according to research by FIU nursing professors.

Published in *Pediatrics* this week, the study "Parent health and

functioning 13 months after infant or child NICU/PICU death," was conducted by JoAnne Youngblut, Ph.D., and Dorothy Brooten, Ph.D., of the Nicole Wertheim College of Nursing & Health Sciences.

The 5-year study examined how the health and functioning of a group of 249 Hispanic, black and white parents, changed after the death of an infant or child in the [neonatal intensive care unit](#) (NICU) or the [pediatric intensive care unit](#) (PICU). The project was funded by a \$2.15 million grant from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) National Institute of Nursing Research.

"The findings from this study are critical in helping parents, families and health care providers understand the potential impact on parents' health after such losses," said Youngblut. "Given our study findings, assessing parents' health over the first year after the death is essential."

The study found significant stress effects on the health of the 249 participants. The group reported:

- 98 hospitalizations for anxiety, depression, panic attacks, chest pain and cardiac problems in the 13 months after the child's death; 29 percent of the hospitalizations were stress related
- 132 newly-diagnosed chronic health conditions including mental illness, angina, hypertension, arthritis and asthma.
- Two mothers reported newly diagnosed cancer
- At six months after the child's death, one mother attempted suicide.
- More Hispanic and black mothers than white mothers had moderate to severe depression and PTSD

"Our goal in doing this type of research is to identify those at greatest health risk and target them for early intervention and support that is both culturally appropriate and acceptable," said Brooten.

Ora Strickland, dean of the Nicole Wertheim College of Nursing and Health Sciences at FIU said that the two researchers have received additional funding and are now studying the impact of the ICU [death](#) on the surviving siblings.

"We are proud to have two of the top nurse researchers in the country leading this body of research which is proving so important to the [health](#) and well-being of families who have undergone such tragedy," said Strickland.

**More information:** [pediatrics.aappublications.org ...  
s.2013-1194.abstract](https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/doi/10.1136/ped.2013-1194)

Provided by Florida International University

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