

Birth of a first baby can trigger anxiety

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Dr Wynter said it was important for couples to ask each other how they are feeling and how they are managing with their new baby.

Around a third of first-time mothers experience anxiety symptoms after the birth of their baby, new research has found.

A study published in the *Journal of Affective Disorders*, has found anxiety and adjustment disorders are more common than post-natal depression in new parents. It also found 17 per cent of first-time fathers also feel anxious and find it difficult to adjust to parenthood during the first six months after their baby's birth.

Dr Karen Wynter, from the Jean Hailes Research Unit at Monash University, said the levels of anxiety and adjustment issues were higher than expected.

"Most people think of post-natal depression as the main issue for new parents, but we found depression is not nearly as prevalent as anxiety," Dr Wynter said.

"I think the research shows that we also need to pay more attention to new fathers, because some of them will have problems adjusting to a new baby in the house. But I don't think we are including men and asking them how they're managing as much as we should at the moment."

The Australian study involved 172 couples from metro and rural areas and from different socio-economic backgrounds. Women and men from each couple were interviewed separately four weeks after the birth of their baby and again when their baby was six-months-old.

Based on the interviews, researchers assessed whether the new parents were displaying symptoms of depression, anxiety and/or adjustment disorders.

"Adjustment to a new baby is bound to have implications for women and men. At work things are usually predictable and go to plan and they're confident they have the skills they need for their career," Dr Wynter said.

"A baby doesn't come with a manual to help new parents manage and parents may feel less confident about caring for a baby than about managing tasks at work. One might expect some adjustment issues and anxiety – but around a third of women and almost a fifth of men in the study reported that they were experiencing enough [anxiety symptoms](#) to interfere with their daily life. We were surprised to find that much anxiety."

Dr Wynter said the study findings highlighted the need for couples and for [health professionals](#) to be more aware that anxiety may arise after the

arrival of a child, particularly a first baby.

"It's great that in Australia we screen new mothers for [postnatal depression](#), but I would like to see a screening process for anxiety, too. I'd also like to see men included in at least one post-natal visit with their GP or with the maternal and child health nurse to check on how they are doing," Dr Wynter said.

"We don't know how many of these cases of adjustment disorders with anxiety or depression symptoms would progress to clinical diagnoses of anxiety or depression if left unmanaged. I think we can safely say that at least some of them would, which is not good for mum, dad or baby."

Based on the findings, Dr Wynter said it was important for couples to ask each other how they are feeling and how they are managing with their new baby.

"Previously our research has shown that if men and women are critical towards each other it can increase the incidence of depression significantly. If couples are gentle and loving it is protective against depression and anxiety symptoms," Dr Wynter said.

"Health professionals, such as GPs and maternal and [child health](#) nurses can also help couples with a period of 'watchful waiting'. This is where new parents are monitored during regular visits that focus on them, as well as their baby, so it's easier to recognise when someone is struggling with [anxiety](#) or with adjusting to parenthood."

Provided by Monash University

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