

Recurring postpartum depression screenings critical for minority mothers

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Credit: Florida International University

Minority mothers and their newborns are at increased risk for problems caused by postpartum depression according to researchers at Florida International University. A higher incidence of preterm births is partly to blame.

While previous research has examined the relationship between [preterm birth](#) and symptoms of postpartum depression, a new FIU study is the first to explore this relationship in low-income Hispanic and black mothers and the effect it has on their infants.

"Preterm birth rates are often higher in minority samples and research suggests that it is due to a combination of factors that put them at risk," said Nicole E. Barroso, clinical psychology Ph.D. candidate and lead author of the study. "Caring for a preterm infant is particularly challenging as premature babies have more medical and temperamental problems."

Results of the study revealed mothers with infants born earlier and at lower birth weights reported higher levels of depressive symptoms. These mothers also reported their infants had difficulty self-soothing and showed higher levels of sadness, distress and fear.

The findings were recently published in the journal [Infant Behavior and Development](#). The study is co-authored by Ph.D. candidate Chelsey M. Hartley and FIU psychology professors Daniel Bagner and Jeremy Pettit.

The sample included 102 mothers with infants between 3 and 10 months of age, of which 31 were born before 37 weeks and with low birth weights.

To determine if the mothers were exhibiting symptoms of postpartum depression, the researchers used a [validated self-report questionnaire](#). Seventeen percent of the mothers in the study were above the clinical cutoff for depression, placing them at high risk for postpartum depression. Previous research has demonstrated higher rates of postpartum depressive symptoms among underrepresented minority mothers, ranging from 11 to 12 percent in Hispanics and blacks compared to 7 percent in whites.

Mothers with postpartum depression can experience feelings of extreme sadness, anxiety, fatigue and thoughts of hurting themselves or their child. The condition can also interfere with their ability to care for themselves or their infant. According to the American Psychological Association, children in this environment can become withdrawn, irritable or inconsolable and are at a higher risk of developing anxiety disorders and major depression.

It is the most common complication of childbirth – more common than gestational diabetes or preeclampsia. At least 50 percent of cases go undiagnosed. Because Hispanic and black mothers have an increased risk for preterm births and postpartum depression, researchers stress the importance of early screenings and treatment.

"Postpartum depression is a mental health issue that affects the mother and child," Barroso said. "Seeking treatment early can help improve outcomes for both."

Barroso and Hartley recommend screening [mothers](#) prior to being discharged from the hospital and at the first few visits to the pediatrician. Since prenatal depression is often a predictor of [postpartum depression](#), they also recommend screening for symptoms during routine prenatal visits.

Provided by Florida International University

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