

Novel iPhone study to investigate genetic risks of postpartum depression

March 22 2016, by Jennifer James

Researchers from the University of North Carolina (UNC) School of Medicine and the international Postpartum Depression: Action Towards Causes and Treatment (PACT) Consortium unveiled [a free iPhone app](#) today to engage women in a genetics research study about postpartum depression (PPD). The study aims to help researchers understand why some women suffer from PPD and others do not – critical knowledge to help researchers find more effective treatments.

The [ResearchKit app](#), called PPD ACTTM, surveys [women](#) to identify those who have had symptoms of PPD. The [app](#) also will invite certain women based on survey responses to provide DNA samples so that researchers can study the genes of those impacted by PPD. ResearchKit is an open-source framework developed by Apple that allows researchers to create app-based studies with global reach. The PPD ACT app is available for iPhone users as a free download [from the App Store](#) in the U.S. and Australia. A U.K. version is coming soon. International partners include Queensland Brain Institute at the University of Queensland and the National Centre for Mental Health at Cardiff University.

UNC School of Medicine faculty members Samantha Meltzer-Brody, MD, MPH, director of the Perinatal Psychiatry Program at the UNC Center for Women's Mood Disorders, and Patrick Sullivan, MD, director of the UNC Center for Psychiatric Genomics, led efforts to design the study and develop the app with support from the UNC Health Care and UNC School of Medicine Center for Innovation.

"Between 12 and 23 percent of women will experience symptoms of depression after pregnancy, and this app will help us better understand why," Dr. Meltzer-Brody said. "We hope that women will share their experiences so that we can more effectively diagnose and treat PPD in the future."

The app informs women of the purpose of the research, asks their consent to participate and collects information about their experiences with PPD. A survey prompts women to answer questions about childbirth, mood, anxiety levels and other symptoms associated with pregnancy and delivery. Based on responses, some women will be invited to give a saliva sample using a "spit kit," which will be provided through the mail to U.S. participants by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH).

"This app and its self-administered testing model will provide us with access to a large amount of data among women across the globe while stretching our research dollars," Dr. Sullivan said. "This will help us to validate and cross-check results, allowing us to draw more precise conclusions."

[Postpartum Progress](#), an international nonprofit organization that supports women with maternal [mental illness](#), is a proud partner of PPD ACT and is committed to spreading the word about the study, particularly among its community of Warrior Moms™, mothers who have experienced perinatal mood and anxiety disorders.

"Postpartum Progress is thrilled to partner with UNC on this landmark research," said Katherine Stone, founder of Postpartum Progress. "Our hope is that findings from this study will prevent future generations from suffering from these devastating disorders."

The app is intended for women 18 years or older who have previously

given birth and believe they may have experienced or are currently experiencing signs or symptoms of PPD, such as anxiety, depression, guilt, irritability or extreme sadness. For more information about PPD and common symptoms, visit pactfortheure.com.

To increase access to the app for women who do not have iPhones, UNC is donating iPads to select perinatal clinics in the U.S. for use by their patients during office visits.

Development of the app and support for the study are provided by the Foundation of Hope for Research and Treatment of Mental Illness and the Departments of Genetics and Psychiatry in the UNC School of Medicine. The Foundation of Hope is dedicated to promoting scientific research aimed at discovering the causes of and potential cures for mental illness in hopes of developing more effective means of treatment. It provides financial support for ongoing and new research and treatment, as well as the development of new research and treatment for the UNC-Chapel Hill Department of Psychiatry and its affiliated psychiatric institutions.

[Little Green Software](#), a full-service app development firm, developed the app. For more information or to download the app, click [here](#).

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

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