

# Depression among parents of newborns can persist six months after NICU discharge

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-Karen Fratantoni, M.D., M.P.H.



Children's National®



Karen Fratantoni, M.D., M.P.H., a Children's pediatrician and the lead study author. Credit: Children's National Health System

Young parents who have less education and care for more than one child are more likely to have persistent symptoms of depression that linger six months after their newborn is discharged from the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU), according to a Children's National Health System research presentation during the Pediatric Academic Societies 2018

annual meeting.

"Using a validated [screening tool](#), we found that 40 percent of [parents](#) in our analyses were positive for [depression](#) at the time their newborn was discharged from the NICU," says Karen Fratantoni, M.D., M.P.H., a Children's pediatrician and the lead study author. "It's reassuring that, for many parents, these depressive symptoms ease over time. However for a select group of parents, depression symptoms persisted six months after discharge. Our findings help to ensure that we target [mental health](#) screening and services to these more vulnerable parents," Dr. Fratantoni adds.

The study is an offshoot from "Giving Parents Support (GPS) after NICU discharge," a large, randomized clinical trial exploring whether providing peer-to-peer parental support after NICU discharge improves babies' overall health as well as their parents' mental health. Mothers of preterm and full-term infants who are hospitalized in NICUs are at risk for peripartum mood disorders, including postpartum depression. The Children's research team sought to determine how many parents of NICU graduates experience depression and which characteristics are shared by parents with elevated depression scores.

They included 125 parents who had enrolled in the GPS clinical trial in their exploratory analyses and assessed [depressive symptoms](#) using a 10-item, validated screening tool, the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CES-D). Eighty-four percent of the parents were women. Nearly 61 percent of their infants were male and were born at a median gestational age of 37.7 weeks and mean birth weight of 2,565 grams. The median length of time these newborns remained in the NICU was 18 days. When the newborns were discharged, 50 parents (40 percent) had elevated CES-D scores. By six months after discharge, that number dropped to 17 parents (14 percent). Their mean age ranged from 26.5 to 30.6 years old.

"Parents of NICU graduates who are young, have less education and are caring for other children are at higher risk for [persistent symptoms](#) of depression," says Dr. Fratanoti. "We know that peripartum mood disorders can persist for one year or more after childbirth so these findings will help us to better match mental health care services to parents who are most in need."

An American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists' committee opinion issued May 2018 calls for all women to have contact with a maternal care provider within the first three weeks postpartum and to undergo a comprehensive postpartum visit no later than 12 weeks after birth that includes screening for [postpartum depression](#) and anxiety using a validated instrument.

Provided by Children's National Medical Center

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