

# Is depression during pregnancy on the rise?

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(HealthDay)—Today's young mothers-to-be may be more likely to develop depression while pregnant than their own mothers were, a new study suggests.

British researchers found that, compared with their mothers' generation, young women who became pregnant between 2012 and 2016 were at greater risk of having "high" scores when they were screened for [depression](#).

The reasons are unknown, and more research is needed to understand the pattern, said lead researcher Rebecca Pearson, of the University of Bristol.

The findings, published online July 13 in *JAMA Network Open*, are based on two generations of U.K. women: almost 2,400 who gave birth between 1990 and 1992, and 180 of their daughters, who gave birth between 2012 and 2016.

All of the women were screened for [depression symptoms](#) during the second and third trimester, using the same standard questionnaire. Among the older generation, 17 percent had "high" depression scores; that compared with 25 percent in the younger generation.

After the researchers weighed several other factors—including the women's education levels and whether it was their first pregnancy—those in the younger generation were 77 percent more likely to have high depression scores.

It's not clear what's going on, Pearson said. But her team speculated on some explanations.

For one, there's evidence that depression has risen among [young women](#), in general—so the pattern among young pregnant women mirrors that, the study authors said.

Plus, new mothers today are more likely to be working, compared to previous generations. It's possible that work pressure, or the strain of

balancing work and home life, is at play, the researchers speculated.

Pearson made another point: Both generations of women were between the ages of 19 and 24 when they became pregnant. But today, the average age of motherhood is older than it was in the early 1990s, she said.

So it's possible that these days, women who become pregnant at that age have a different experience than their mothers did. They may be more "socially isolated" or feel more pressure, for example, Pearson suggested.

A psychiatrist who was not involved in the study agreed.

"Being a young mother now may have a different meaning than it did for earlier generations," said Dr. Elizabeth Fitelson, an assistant professor of psychiatry at Columbia University Medical Center, in New York City.

But she also said it's not certain the findings reflect a true increase in the rate of prenatal depression. Even though both generations answered the same depression-screening questionnaire, women today might perceive and answer the questions differently—possibly because of the greater public awareness of depression, Fitelson explained.

Regardless, Fitelson said the bottom line is clear: "Depression in pregnancy is common. It's the most common complication of pregnancy. And we need to make sure we have the resources to manage it."

Depression screening is recommended for all pregnant women—though that doesn't mean all women are being screened, she noted.

The treatment options include psychological counseling and social support, Fitelson said. If the depression is more severe, antidepressants

may be needed.

There can be risks to taking medication during pregnancy. But, Fitelson said, untreated depression also carries risks. It is tied to heightened risks of preterm birth and low birth weight. And those new moms are at high risk of postpartum depression, she said.

The new findings leave a lot of unknowns. Pearson said her team had no information on whether the women had partners, for example. She said that could be a factor in the higher depression scores in the younger generation, since their relationships may be "less secure" than their mothers' relationships.

It's also unclear, Pearson said, whether the findings are relevant to relatively older [women](#), since the study participants were younger than 25.

As for whether similar patterns might be seen in other countries, Pearson speculated that they would. "Many other countries face similar social and financial pressures to the U.K., including increases in working motherhood, pressures on relationships and lower social support," she said.

Fitelson stressed that if a pregnant woman is feeling depressed, she should seek help without guilt. "This isn't your fault," she said. "It doesn't mean you're not going to be a good mother."

**More information:** Rebecca Pearson, Ph.D., lecturer, psychiatric epidemiology, University of Bristol, England; Elizabeth Murphy Fitelson, M.D., assistant professor, psychiatry, Columbia University Medical Center, New York City; July 13, 2018, *JAMA Network Open*, online

The March of Dimes has more on [depression during pregnancy](#).

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