

Mum's sleep matters—the effect of sleep on an unborn baby

July 19 2018, by Annabel Mansfield

How much sleep mothers get when they are pregnant can impact on the health of their growing baby, according to a new scoping study conducted by the University of South Australia.

Assessing outcomes relating to birth weight, fetal growth, pre-term delivery and stillbirth, researchers identified four key aspects of maternal sleep that may contribute to poor fetal outcomes.

Lead researcher, UniSA's Associate Professor Jane Warland, says the research gives expectant mothers and clinicians important insights into sleep and healthy pregnancies.

"This study looks into relatively un-navigated territory, at the relationship between fetal health and maternal sleep, mapping commonalities across maternal sleep conditions including sleep apnea, [sleep duration](#), [sleep quality](#), and sleep position," Assoc Prof Warland says.

"Adults sleep for a third of their lives, so too an [unborn baby](#), is asleep for a third of their gestation, so it makes sense that maternal sleep could have an impact the health of the fetus.

"We already know that if a mother sleeps on her back, it can negatively impact the unborn baby, probably by reducing the delivery of oxygen and nutrients to the placenta.

"But across these studies we also found consistencies among mothers suffering from [obstructive sleep apnea](#), short sleeps, and poor quality sleep which could increase the likelihood of pre-term birth, and perhaps even stillbirth.

"The most significant finding suggested a relationship between premature birth and maternal [sleep apnea](#), with four out of the five larger studies showing a clear connection between the two."

Adverse outcomes for an unborn baby remain a reality in Australia, with about [15 per cent of newborns needing extra care at birth, one in 10 babies born prematurely](#), and [six babies stillborn every day](#).

Assoc Prof Warland says that preventing stillbirth and reducing fetal risks remains one of the greatest challenges of modern maternity care.

"In Australia, the rate of stillbirth is double that of our national road toll," Assoc Prof Warland says.

"This hasn't changed in 20 years and despite the prevalence of stillbirth, in up to 40 percent of cases, the cause of death remains unknown.

"By investigating this important field of study we're hoping to provide clinicians and families with important information that may safeguard the health and well-being of an unborn baby and reduce the incidence of poor fetal outcomes."

Provided by University of South Australia

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