

# Women 4 times more likely to develop lupus after stillbirth

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Women who have gone through the trauma of having a stillbirth are four times more likely to develop lupus than women with an uncomplicated live birth, according to a University of Manchester study.

The researchers found a link between [stillbirth](#) and connective tissue disorders though [lupus](#) had by far the strongest association.

Connective tissue disorders are a group of disorders involving the tissue that supports organs and other parts of the body

They also showed that the first signs of lupus—the presence of antibodies—could appear up to five years after stillbirth without symptoms

And that suggests many [women](#) may get pregnant without realising the risks or lose their baby without knowing why.

The team studied more than 100,000 mums to see if those who had lost babies went on to develop lupus, [connective tissue disease](#), or anti-phospholipid syndrome or antibodies.

They used the Clinical Practice Research Datalink, a world-renowned system that collects anonymised patient data from a network of GP practices across the UK.

They performed statistical regression to calculate the relative risk ratios, and compared stillbirth with live births.

The study is published in the *British Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology* and funded by the charities Tommy's and Sparks through their lupus In Pregnancy Study (LIPS) partnership.

Lead author was Dr. Hannah Kither- a researcher at the University of Manchester and Obstetrician at Royal Bolton NHS Trust. She said, "Stillbirth leaves both a psychological and a biological legacy; this study shows quite conclusively that these women have an increased risk of developing lupus.

"We think that either the stillbirth is a result of underlying immunological abnormalities akin to that seen in lupus or that the stillbirth itself triggers a cascade of immune reactions in the maternal system culminating in CTD in later life.

"The impact of stillbirth is traumatic, and the worries over having complications later on will be doubly hard for these women.

"But we hope the knowledge this research gives them will empower them in future years."

Professor Alex Heazell, a researcher at the University of Manchester, and Consultant Obstetrician and Director of the Tommy's Stillbirth Research Centre at Saint Mary's Hospital, part of Manchester University NHS Foundation Trust (MFT) was also part of the research team. He said, "When women have a stillbirth, they are screened for a range of diseases, but now we know lupus won't appear until much later—sometimes years later.

"As stillbirth is now a known risk factor for lupus, GPs should be aware of this when seeing their patients' investigation results. Women themselves should also be vigilant and look out for symptoms of lupus which include [joint pain](#), muscle pain and [chronic fatigue](#).

"Around one in 240 women in the U.K. suffer a stillbirth, this affects a lot of women so we feel action is needed."

Tommy's CEO Jane Brewin said, "This study gives a strong steer that [pregnant women](#) should be tested early on for lupus and other related diseases, so that doctors can keep a close eye on anyone at risk throughout their pregnancy and beyond.

"We know that both lupus and baby loss are more common in BAME

communities, but previous investigations of the link between these issues have come from countries that aren't as diverse as the UK, so this study gives us a really important new insight. That said, it can't tell us whether connective tissue disorders were the cause or the result of stillbirth—so we need more in-depth research to unpick that relationship, which is why Tommy's set up the Manchester LIPS clinic with Sparks."

**More information:** Hannah Kither et al. Adverse Pregnancy Outcomes and subsequent development of Connective Tissue Disease in the UK: An epidemiological study, *BJOG: An International Journal of Obstetrics & Gynaecology* (2020). [DOI: 10.1111/1471-0528.16191](https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-0528.16191)

Provided by University of Manchester

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