

# High-risk mothers missing out on mental health checks

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One in five Australian mothers is not receiving critical perinatal mental health checks, a University of Queensland study has found.

School of Public Health researcher Dr. Katrina Moss and her team found older [mothers](#) (about 35 years old and over) are 35 per cent less likely to be screened for perinatal mental health, and [women](#) with emotional distress are 23 per cent less likely.

"This is despite the fact that we know up to 20 per cent of women experience anxiety or depression during pregnancy or in the first year following birth," Dr. Moss said.

Analysing data from more than 7,500 women in the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health, researchers mapped mental health screening rates between 2000 and 2017, and compared these figures to policy initiatives and clinical practice guidelines.

They found the number of women being screened had more than tripled since 2000, with the introduction of the Perinatal Mental Health Action Plan and the National Perinatal Depression Initiative.

"Australia's substantial investment in perinatal mental health screening is paying off, but some women are still slipping through the cracks," Dr. Moss said.

Dr. Moss said this was particularly true for [vulnerable groups](#) like women who had previously reported [emotional distress](#).

"Mothers are in frequent contact with [health care professionals](#) during pregnancy and in the first postnatal year," she said.

"This opportunity to identify mothers at risk is too important to be missed."

Clinical practice guidelines recommend mothers receive mental health screening both during pregnancy and in the first postnatal year.

Maternal mental health issues are associated with premature births, low birth weights and childhood development problems.

"Perinatal mental health issues are costly to women, families and the wider community," Dr. Moss said.

"For some women, perinatal mental health screening can be the first step in a pathway of care."

Mothers requiring mental health support can contact the PANDA helpline on 1300 706 306 or visit the Gidget Foundation website.

This is the first Australian study to report changes in perinatal [mental health screening](#) over time in a large national sample.

**More information:** Katrina M. Moss et al, How rates of perinatal mental health screening in Australia have changed over time and which women are missing out, *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* (2020). [DOI: 10.1111/1753-6405.12999](https://doi.org/10.1111/1753-6405.12999)

Provided by University of Queensland

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