

Pandemic poses health risk to moms of preschoolers

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Stress levels of mothers with preschoolers soared during the COVID-19 lockdown, a new study shows. Researchers say the study supports the need to provide moms with reliable, affordable childcare options. Credit: Pennington Biomedical Research Center

Stress levels of moms with preschoolers soared during the pandemic, with twice as many of the mothers reporting they lost sleep during the COVID-19 outbreak than before it.

"Moms of young children are already less likely to get the recommended amount of sleep and [physical activity](#) than women who don't have children. These shortfalls could raise the risk for [obesity](#) and [poor health](#), and the lockdown worsened the situation by increasing the [levels of stress](#) and [household chaos](#)," said Chelsea Kracht, Ph.D., a Postdoctoral Researcher in the Pediatric Obesity and Health Behavior Laboratory at Pennington Biomedical Research Center.

The bottom line? "Mothers, especially those with preschoolers, need a lot more than flowers on Mother's Day," said Amanda Staiano, Ph.D., Associate Professor and Director, Pediatric Obesity and Health Behavior Laboratory. "There are a number of ways moms can reduce [stress](#), such as taking a break from the news and spending a few minutes unwinding before they go to sleep. But what moms really need is more support, from their family, workplaces and communities. They need systemic change."

Dr. Kracht agreed.

The study findings support the necessity of providing mothers with reliable, affordable childcare options and a clear path to maintaining a healthy work-life balance, she said.

Mothers who worked remotely during the COVID-19 shutdown reported more household chaos than those who were not teleworking, Dr. Kracht said. This is likely because the first group of mothers had to supervise their children's remote schooling and telework at the same time.

Having fathers or other family members take on some of the childcare

and housework would help mothers balance the demands of their careers and personal lives, she said.

The new study looked at the relationship between household chaos—disorder, noise, and crowding—stress, physical activity and sleep for moms. Researchers surveyed more than 1,700 mothers of 3-to-5-year-olds during May 2020. Moms in all 50 states and Washington, D.C. participated. The study was published in the scientific journal [*Women's Health*](#).

Around half of the mothers in the study got the recommended amount of sleep and physical activity. Mothers with higher stress levels were far less likely to meet the sleep or physical activity guidelines.

"One of our goals as a [research center](#) is to break the generational cycle of obesity," said Pennington Biomedical Executive Director John Kirwan, Ph.D. "Research that shows how much the pandemic affected the health of mothers may help policymakers and providers take steps to better support [mothers](#) and avoid a related increase in chronic diseases like obesity, type 2 diabetes, and heart disease."

More information: Chelsea L Kracht et al, Household chaos, maternal stress, and maternal health behaviors in the United States during the COVID-19 outbreak, *Women's Health* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/17455065211010655](#)

Provided by Pennington Biomedical Research Center

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