

Moms' mental health needs attention during and after pregnancy

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Madison, Wisconsin - Poor mental health before and during pregnancy are "giant red flags" predicting which new mothers are more likely to suffer postpartum mood disorders, a new nationwide survey reveals.

While between 10 and 20 percent of new mothers suffer mood disorders within the first year after giving birth, it wasn't obvious which mothers were most at risk.

But scientists at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health found a pattern that predicts which new moms are likely to have trouble: Those who had [mental health](#) problems before pregnancy were nearly two times more likely to have postpartum problems and those who suffer during pregnancy are over 11 times more likely to suffer mood disorders after their babies are born, after adjusting for other factors.

Notably, over 50 percent of [women](#) with poor postpartum mental health reported having some history of poor mental health.

"This finding is striking because we've identified a giant red flag for postpartum mental health problems," says Dr. Whitney Witt, the study's lead author and assistant professor in the Department of Population Health Sciences. "If providers look at this as a warning sign, they may be able to do more to help these women before their mental health problems progress."

Postpartum depression in mothers can affect [children](#), as well, leading to impaired attachment, [behavior problems](#), social and cognitive limitations and [low self-esteem](#) in children.

The researchers examined data on 1,863 new mothers who were surveyed as part of the 1996-2006 Medical Expenditure Panel Survey, taking a "life course perspective" to determine the factors that influence a mother's mental health.

They found several disparities in mental health, including:

- Asian and Pacific Islander women are almost three times more likely than white (non Hispanic) women to report mental health problems after pregnancy
- Hispanic women are less likely than white women to report poor postpartum mental health. Women with less than a high school degree are almost four times more likely than high school graduates to report poor mental health after pregnancy
- Women in poor physical health are almost three times more likely than women in good physical health to report mental health problems after pregnancy
- Women who experienced any pregnancy complication were almost twice as likely to report poor postpartum mental health as women who did not experience any complications

Witt says the results tell physicians, nurses and others which expectant [mothers](#) should get special attention to their mental-health needs.

"We need to be screening and treating women for poor mental health much earlier in their lives," Witt says. "Timely and effective treatment for [mental health problems](#) is necessary to 'break the chain' of women's poor mental health."

More information: The research was funded by the National Institutes of Health. It is being published in the journal [Women's Health](#) Issues.

Provided by University of Wisconsin-Madison

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