

# Perinatal mental health crucial for physical and mental wellbeing of both parents and child

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The importance of looking after the mental health of parents during pregnancy and after childbirth, in order to promote the physical and mental wellbeing of both parents and child, is highlighted in *The Lancet* today.

If left untreated, a parent's mental disorder can be associated with psychological difficulties in the [children](#), according to researchers at the University of Bristol, King's College London, the University of Oxford

and Cardiff University.

Perinatal [mental health disorders](#) are common during pregnancy and the postnatal period – occurring in more than 10 per cent of women in high income countries. In low and middle income countries the rates are probably even higher.

A recent report revealed the long-term economic costs of perinatal [mental disorders](#) to society in the UK to be £8 billion a year. The burden of perinatal [mental health](#) disorders may be even greater in low and middle income countries because the loss of earning from an inability to work has a greater impact on the families' health and nutrition.

Where resources are scarce, children are more at risk of being affected by perinatal mental health disorders and innovative strategies are needed to help tackle this problem.

This Lancet series discusses the full range of mental health disorders that can occur during pregnancy and after childbirth: how often they occur; their causes; the risks to mother and baby; treatments that are effective; and how we can prevent these disorders. Importantly, the authors draw attention to gaps in our knowledge and where more research is urgently required.

Dr Rebecca Pearson, from the University of Bristol, was joint first author on the third paper, which summarises the evidence for links between parental mental health disorders and the risk of low birthweight, prematurity, and later psychological disturbances in children.

The ways in which particular perinatal mental health disorders are associated with specific aspects of child development are complex and not yet fully understood. Further investigations are important in order to reduce the risk to the child.

Considerable research has been undertaken to develop interventions but much more needs to be done especially in low and [middle income countries](#).

The authors add that most research has focussed on disorders in mothers, but depression in fathers is more common than previously thought with emerging evidence suggesting that this is also associated with effects on children.

Dr Pearson, who holds a postdoctoral fellowship from the Elizabeth Blackwell Institute for Health Research, said: "We found a vast number of studies from around the world reporting links between perinatal mental disorders and a wide range of difficulties in children, not just emotional and behavioural issues but also lower school grades and poor growth in low income settings.

"The risks are, however, usually small and many children are not adversely affected. We are beginning to better understand the ways in which the parent's disorder can influence the developing child and the circumstances under which the risks to the child are highest, but more work is needed. This understanding is essential to developing ways to minimise the impact on the child."

**More information:** Perinatal mental health paper #1: [press.thelancet.com/perinatal1.pdf](http://press.thelancet.com/perinatal1.pdf)

Perinatal mental health paper #2: [:press.thelancet.com/perinatal2.pdf](http://press.thelancet.com/perinatal2.pdf)

Perinatal mental health paper #3: [:press.thelancet.com/perinatal3.pdf](http://press.thelancet.com/perinatal3.pdf)

Provided by University of Bristol

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