



ECHO

Environmental influences
on Child Health Outcomes

A program supported by the NIH

Study Summary

Depression in New Mothers is Common, Especially When Babies are Born too Early

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Who sponsored this study?

This research was supported by the Environmental influences on Child Health Outcomes (ECHO) program, Office of The Director, National Institutes of Health.

Footnote: The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Institutes of Health.

Why was this study needed?

The postpartum period can be especially hard for mothers when babies are born prematurely, but researchers don't know much about the effect that preterm births can have on a mother's mental health. This study assessed postpartum depressive symptom trajectories for mothers of preterm and full-term babies, and followed participating mothers for five years after birth to better understand the long-term risks for depression and potential opportunities for treatment.

Who was involved?

The study involved 11,320 pregnant women aged 18 to 52 years old from 35 ECHO cohorts across the United States. About 11% of these women had babies that were born before they were due (preterm infants) and 89% had babies that were born on or near their due date (full-term infants).

What happened during the study?

Researchers analyzed self-reported depression measurements for women when they were pregnant and after they had their babies. These women also completed at least one follow-up assessment before their children were 5 years old.

What were the study results?

During the first five years following childbirth, one out of every five mothers who gave birth to a preterm baby had symptoms of depression, while one out of every ten mothers who gave birth to a full-term baby had symptoms of depression. For mothers of preterm infants, it was also more common to have symptoms that got worse over time compared to women who gave birth to full-term babies. The most severe symptoms of depression were seen in women who gave birth early.

Footnote: Results reported here are for a single study. Other or future studies may provide new information or different results. You should always consult with a qualified healthcare provider for diagnosis and for answers to your personal questions.

Impact

This study supports previous reports that many mothers struggle with their mental health after giving birth, and women who have preterm babies may be particularly at risk for symptoms of depression—such as sadness, stress, anxiety, and feelings of being overwhelmed. Maternal mental health can influence their child’s health and development. Right now, doctors only screen women for depression symptoms when they are pregnant and for six months after they have their babies. This study shows that some women continue to struggle with depression for years after they give birth or start experiencing depression when their children are older. This trend was especially true for women whose babies were born prematurely. This study shows the importance of asking women about their mental health for much longer than six months after they give birth and helping them find supportive interventions.

What happens next?

It is important for future research to study what factors put some women at higher risk of experiencing depression after giving birth, particularly mothers of premature babies. Future research should also investigate what types of programs can help support mothers and their mental health during pregnancy and after birth.

Where can I learn more?

Access the full journal article titled, “Trajectories of Depressive Symptoms Among Mothers of Preterm and Full-Term Infants in a National Sample” in [Archives of Women's Mental Health](#).

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