

AAP News Story

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Babies born to distressed mothers are more likely to develop behavioural difficulties, but researchers are hoping to address the problem by detecting at-risk women in early pregnancy. Two Sydney academics believe identifying and treating expectant mothers with early symptoms or risk factors of depression and anxiety may reduce levels of post-natal depression. Apart from the obvious benefits to mothers, research psychologist Sue Priest and psychiatrist Marie-Paule Austin said the consequences for children were also significant.

"Babies of mothers who are distressed are often harder to settle, they're often slower to establish feeding," Dr Priest explained. "We know even in pregnant women who are highly stressed, there are effects on the foetus, biochemically. Later on their children will show increased rates of behavioural problems. It's a good reason to try and get in early and reduce serious levels of stress and distress."

Dr Priest said postnatal depression and anxiety had also been associated with difficulties in bonding between mother and baby as well as potentially curbing a child's intellectual development.

The researchers, from Sydney's Black Dog Institute which studies mood disorders, were recently awarded the \$50,000 Kinsman scholarship by the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists for research into post-natal depression. They plan to follow up women who showed early symptoms of distress or were deemed at risk of developing depression or anxiety when they attended Sydney's Royal Hospital for Women during their pregnancies.

The women will be followed up 12 to 15 months after giving birth. All were screened for mental health problems by filling in a questionnaire during ante-natal checks with a midwife. Those considered at risk were encouraged to seek additional support and treatment.

Dr Priest said traditionally, women with emotional stress were often not picked up until after the baby was born when treating the condition was more difficult. "What we're trying to do is get in early, to identify those in pregnancy who are already showing signs," she said in an interview. "We know that up to 40 per cent of women with post-natal depression already had symptoms in pregnancy."

If the study shows the screening methods work, it may lead to recommendations to improve the care of women during pregnancy. "In Australia, there's a push to make inquiry about emotional well-being a routine part of the assessment of a pregnant woman," Dr Priest said. "We strongly support that."

Women who feel they may be at risk of developing post-natal depression can read more at www.blackdoginstitute.com.au. Examples of risk factors include previous bouts of depression, a recent history of major life stresses such as a death in the family, relocation or unemployment, relationship problems and domestic violence.

<http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/media/newsreleases/index.cfm>