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BRISBANE, Nov 14 AAP - Older mothers, particularly those who conceive through invitro-fertilisation (IVF), may be at increased risk of developing depression during pregnancy or after the baby is born. Psychiatrist Marie-Paule Austin, of Sydney's Black Dog Institute, said that although anecdotal evidence suggested IVF mothers may be particularly vulnerable to depression this was not borne out in the studies done to date. However their anxiety levels are likely to be higher which in turn can contribute to the onset of depression in pregnancy or postnatally.

Many women who enter IVF programs are career women who have waited to have their first baby. "They're often high achieving, perfectionist-type people who are used to having significant control over their lives." "IVF can be very stressful, with the pressure of multiple attempts as the biological clock is ticking over. So even before they conceive, there's pre-conception stress, then when they do conceive there is the fear of having a miscarriage or a premature baby" Associate Professor Austin said during Post-natal Depression Awareness Week.

Psychologist Susan Priest said around 15 per cent of women experienced depression during pregnancy, with 40 per cent of those continuing on to suffer the baby blues. "Normally, if it's not treated, it's at its worst during the first year," she said. The Black Dog Institute, which researches mood disorders, has recently included information about depression and anxiety during pregnancy and post-natally on its website at www.blackdoginstitute.org.au, specifically targetted at new mothers and mothers-to-be.

Associate Professor Austin, who works at Sydney's Royal Hospital for Women, said women attending antenatal clinics in early pregnancy were routinely screened for risk factors that might predispose them to depression and anxiety. These can include relationship difficulties, lack of supports, bereavement, past history of a depressive illness or childhood abuse, financial problems, problems conceiving and lack of self-esteem or high trait anxiety.

Both Associate Professor Austin and Dr Priest stressed depression was common in pregnant women and new mothers and should be openly discussed. "Not telling anyone is the worst thing they can do," Associate Professor Austin said. "Don't wait until it becomes worse. Seek help early." Dr Priest said treatment could include antidepressant medication, counselling and practical help such as through a mothers' support group. "The treatments are going to be tailored to what is going on in each individual and in their families," she said.

In severe cases of untreated depression, some women can self-harm, making it important for family and friends to encourage mothers to seek help if they notice warning signs. "If necessary, offer to accompany them to the appointment. Don't just ignore the problem. For some women, it's more than just normal stress and they are starting to tip into a mental illness," Dr Priest said. Apart from helping the woman, experts say it's important to treat depression and anxiety as early as possible to avoid problems developing in the relationship between mother and baby, with her partner and possibly with other children in the family.