

# Abuse jeopardizes new mothers' mental health

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Ashley Pritchard, an SFU doctoral student in psychology, has helped discover the extent to which women who experience intimate partner abuse during pregnancy wind up with postpartum mental health problems.

(Medical Xpress)—Ashley Pritchard, a Simon Fraser University doctoral student, is among four authors of a new research paper calling for closer monitoring of new mothers for mental health problems in light of their findings.

The four have advanced previous research that links [intimate partner](#) abuse to postpartum [mental health problems](#). They discovered that 61 per cent of all women who participated in the study experienced [mental health](#) symptoms.

The open-access journal *BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth* has published online the researchers' study, Intimate partner abuse before and during pregnancy as risk factors for postpartum mental [health problems](#).

The study examined associations of psychological, physical and sexual abuse experienced by 100 English-speaking mothers in British Columbia,

aged 18 years and older, in the first three months of their [postpartum period](#).

Even though the abuse was typically minor in nature, such as name-calling, any type of intimate partner abuse—before or during pregnancy—was linked to higher than normal levels of postpartum mental health problems. Forty-seven per cent of all women who participated in the study experienced at least moderate mental health symptoms.

The participants were largely from high socioeconomic backgrounds and were not considered at high risk of postpartum mental health problems.

"I think when people hear the word abuse they automatically think about physical abuse," says Pritchard, an SFU psychology student who interviewed the study's participants and helped recruit them.

"This research shows that different types of abuse have negative consequences and should be part of routine health checks for new mothers."

In addition to questions about their general health and wellbeing, participants answered questions about their experiences of intimate partner abuse and about their mental health during their postpartum period.

Their symptoms, which included depression, stress, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), were above normal levels and were triggered by specific types of abuse.

For example, psychological abuse—verbal and emotional—was associated with stress and PTSD. Physical abuse was associated with depression, OCD and PTSD. Sexual abuse was associated with OCD.

Multivariate modeling also showed that as the number of types of intimate partner abuse experienced increased—especially during pregnancy—so did the number of different types of postpartum mental health problems, and their severity.

The authors say their findings underscore the complex risks and needs associated with intimate partner abuse among postpartum women, regardless of socioeconomic background.

Recognizing that it would be challenging to achieve, the authors recommend that healthcare providers screen [new mothers](#) more intensely for intimate partner abuse.

"Educating both the public and [health care professionals](#) about the prevalence and effects of intimate partner abuse would help to diminish the stigma surrounding the issue," says Pritchard.

"In addition to education, the development of strong rapport and trust between mothers-to-be and their healthcare providers would likely make it easier to discuss topics such as partner abuse openly."

The authors advocate that further studies investigate intervention and prevention strategies.

**More information:** The complete study is available online:  
[www.biomedcentral.com/1471-2393/14/132/abstract](http://www.biomedcentral.com/1471-2393/14/132/abstract)

Provided by Simon Fraser University

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