

Staying active has physical and mental health benefits for mothers and children, including toddlers and preschoolers

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New moms and moms-to-be have an increased likelihood of maternal depression and anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic, according to preliminary research from one of two University of Alberta studies

looking at the toll isolation measures are having on physical activity levels at the earliest stages of life.

Margie Davenport, a pregnancy and exercise researcher, explained being physically active during pregnancy or afterward is associated with a substantial reduction in the risk of developing depression and [depressive symptoms](#).

"These psychological benefits are at risk when physical activity is decreased," she said. "Knowing to what extent the pandemic is impacting this population's ability to remain physically active and the subsequent impact on [mental health](#) will help us to better understand what we can do to help."

Between April 14 and May 8, Davenport and her Program for Pregnancy and Postpartum Health team recruited 900 women who were pregnant or within the first year after delivery to participate in an online survey. Among the questions, respondents were asked to self-report levels of depression/depressive symptoms, anxiety and physical activity.

The results showed 40.7 percent of respondents had survey scores indicative of depression, compared with 15 percent pre-pandemic, while moderate to high anxiety was identified in 72 percent of women versus 29 percent pre-pandemic.

And while the uncertainties behind the pandemic would drive some of the anxiety, the survey showed that women engaging who met or exceeded the 2019 Canadian Guideline for Physical Activity Throughout Pregnancy of 150 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity during the pandemic had significantly lower scores for both anxiety and depression than those who did not.

Keeping up with the guidelines became markedly harder in the early

days of the lockdown as 64 percent of women in the study reported reduced physical activity with the onset of isolation measures, while 15 percent increased and 21 percent had no change to their physical activity.

Davenport said these data suggest physical activity, which has previously been shown to reduce depression and depressive symptoms in pregnancy, may be associated with better mental health during the pandemic.

She added even in non-pandemic times, pregnant and postpartum women can experience events that will limit their ability to be physically active or socially engaged.

"Whether they're hospitalized due to pregnancy complications, or not leaving the house because of a colicky baby, or don't have the support of family or friends, many women can feel isolated and experience a decline in mental health," said Davenport.

"We hope that further research will help us create resources and supports for pregnant and postpartum women who experience these situations."

Need to move

For toddlers and preschoolers, Valerie Carson, who heads up the U of A's Behavioural Epidemiology Lab, said closures to child-care centres, parks, playgrounds and recreation facilities can make it more difficult for parents to support their children's [physical activity](#), and can lead to a reliance on sedentary activities such as screen time.

Less movement and increased sedentary behaviour may be indirectly affecting sleeping behaviour of toddlers and preschoolers, which can add another layer to an already stressful time, added Carson, who was a key contributor to Canada's [24-Hour Movement Guidelines for the Early](#)

Years.

"While there are age-specific recommendations in place, the overall message is the same—move more, sit less and ensure an appropriate amount of sleep is taking place," said Carson, who, along with Davenport, is a professor in the Faculty of Kinesiology, Sport, and Recreation.

The benefits of adhering to the recommendations include better growth, cardiorespiratory and musculoskeletal fitness, [cognitive development](#), psychosocial health and emotional regulation, motor development, body composition, quality of life and well-being, as well as reduced injuries.

And while the positive effects of healthy movement may help parents and children handle new stresses and increased anxiety associated with the current pandemic, Carson acknowledged that meeting recommendations during a health crisis can be a struggle.

"We appreciate this is a very challenging time for many parents, and we hope this study can provide insight on how to support them and their families in striking a healthy balance of moving, sitting and sleeping," she said.

Carson added that while this study is specific to the COVID-19 pandemic, the results may also apply to other environmental scenarios such as poor air quality stemming from forest fires and extreme cold-weather spells during winter.

Provided by University of Alberta

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