

# Young women are the most vulnerable to postpartum mental illness, study finds

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A study, led by researchers at Greater Manchester Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust, the University of Manchester and the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR), has found that young women are most vulnerable to postpartum mental illness.

The term "postpartum" refers to the period following childbirth. Whilst childbirth is a leading cause of [mental illness](#) in [women](#), up until now, how it affects women at different ages has been unknown.

This is the first study of its kind to compare rates of mental illness during postpartum periods and non-postpartum periods in women of different ages. The study examined UK [general practice](#) data from almost 2.7 million women in the UK. Postpartum periods were matched on age and general practice to non-postpartum periods and Cox regression models were then used to compare new mental illness between postpartum and non-postpartum periods.

The results showed strong evidence that the effect

of giving birth on mental illness was age-dependent for depression, anxiety and affective psychosis, with the effect being far greater in [young women](#).

In 15-19 year olds, depression was over seven times more likely to occur in postpartum periods than non-postpartum periods. 15-19 year olds were also 50% more likely to develop anxiety in postpartum periods than non-postpartum periods.

Childbirth also had over twice the effect on affective psychosis in women aged 15-24 compared to women overall.

These findings will aid the understanding of postpartum mental illness. This will inform the development of targeted support and allow clinicians to provide [accurate information](#) to women and their families.

Dr. Eleanor Swift, ST4 Doctor in General Adult Psychiatry at Greater Manchester Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust, and NIHR Academic Clinical Fellow said:

"This study adds new evidence that the effect of childbirth on mental illness is highly age-dependent. Young women are affected to the greatest extent, particularly for depression and anxiety. This is important because postpartum mental illnesses has been repeatedly linked to poorer outcomes for mother and child and these risks make planning parenthood more daunting for women. We hope that having a better understanding of which women are most at risk of postpartum mental [illness](#) can help provide clearer information and target treatments to the right groups of women to reduce health inequalities."

**More information:** Eleanor R. Swift et al. Young women are the most vulnerable to postpartum mental illness: A retrospective cohort study in UK primary care, *Journal of Affective Disorders* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jad.2020.08.016](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2020.08.016)

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