Maternal Depression May Alter Stress and Immune Markers in Children

New research suggests that depression in women may affect their children's stress and physical well-being throughout life.

For the Depression & Anxiety study, researchers followed 125 children from birth to 10 years. At 10 years, mothers' and children's cortisol (CT) and secretory immunoglobulin (s-IgA)—markers of stress and the immune system—were measured, mother-child interaction were observed, mothers and children underwent psychiatric diagnoses, and children's externalizing and internalizing symptoms were reported.

Depressed mothers had higher CT and s-IgA levels and displayed more negative parenting, characterized by negative affect, intrusion, and criticism. Children of depressed mothers tended to exhibit certain psychiatric disorders, have higher s-IgA levels, and display greater social withdrawal.

“Following mothers and children across the first decade of life, we found that exposure to maternal depression impairs functioning of the child's immune system and stress response. Such disruptions to the child's stress and immune system, in turn, led to greater child psychopathology,” said senior author Dr. Ruth Feldman, of the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya, in Israel. “We also found that the impairments to the child's stress response and immunity were shaped by similar effects of the depression on the mothers’ stress and immune system and their consequent impact on reducing the quality of maternal caregiving. Our findings show the complex effects of maternal depression on children's physiology, health, and psychopathology and advocate the need for early interventions that specifically target maternal stress and enhance parenting behavior.”

Additional Information


About Journal

Depression and Anxiety, the official journal of the Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA), welcomes original research and synthetic review articles covering neurobiology (genetics and neuroimaging), epidemiology, experimental psychopathology, and treatment (psychotherapeutic and pharmacologic) aspects of mood and anxiety disorders and related phenomena in humans. The journal publishes only two types of articles: original Research Papers and Reviews. A priority is placed on treatment and review papers, and on papers with information and findings that will enhance the clinical evaluation and care of individuals struggling with the effects of these disorders.

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