

One in four pregnant women has mental health problem

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A quarter of all pregnant women suffer from mental health problems, a UK study has revealed.

For the first time in the UK, researchers at King's College in London looked at the prevalence of mental health problems or mental health disorders in pregnant women when visiting their midwives for ante-natal care.

They found that when interviewed, one in four women had a mental illness ranging from depression (11 per cent) and anxiety (15 per cent) to eating disorders (two per cent) and obsessive-compulsive disorder (two per cent).

Mental health in pregnancy

The results show it is more common than previously thought but also that two simple questions can help identify these problems.

Louise Howard, the report author and Professor of Women's Mental Health at King's College London, said: "In clinical practice, maternity professionals need to identify whether or not a woman has any mental disorder, not only mood disorders which until recently have been the main focus of concern.

"This study supports the NICE recommendation that women should be asked, by a non-judgmental and supportive health professional, at all contacts in pregnancy and after birth

about their emotional well-being and are given the opportunity to respond to these structured questions.”

NICE is the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, providing guidance on health and social care.

It has already been established that mental illness during pregnancy can be damaging for women, their pregnancy and for the child from birth through to adolescence. Early diagnosis and treatment is therefore vital.

The research, published in the British Journal of Psychiatry today and funded by the National Institute for Health Research, went on to evaluate the best way of identifying mental health problems during pregnancy.

Louise Howard, the report author and Professor of Women’s Mental Health at King’s College London, said: “In clinical practice, maternity professionals need to identify whether or not a woman has any mental disorder, not only mood disorders which until recently have been the main focus of concern.”

Researchers recruited 545 pregnant women, over the age of 16, attending their ante-natal booking appointment at an inner city maternity service in south-east London between November 2014 and June 2016.

It found the two questions asked by midwives were as effective in identifying “any disorder” as the 10-point questionnaire patients were asked to complete by themselves.

Maria Bavetta, of mental health charity Maternal OCD, said: “This shows how vital it is for pregnant women to be asked the right questions at the right time with a non-judgmental space to be listened to.

“I wish I had been given the opportunity to share my thoughts in a way that would have helped me access specialist maternal mental health services quicker – this is a duty we need to fulfil as every mum should have the right to be the mummy they want to be.”