

Which women are missing out on perinatal mental health screening

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Audience:

Mothers, health professionals working with mothers during pregnancy and in the first postnatal year (e.g. midwives, GPs, nurses, Obstetricians).

Keywords:

Perinatal, mental health, screening, mothers

What you need to know:

- The percentage of women screened in line with clinical practice guidelines increased from 21.3% in 2000 to 79.3% in 2017.
- However, in 2017, 1 in 5 mothers did not receive the recommend screening.
- Older mothers and those who had previously reported emotional distress were most likely to miss out.

What this research is about:

Up to 20% of women report mental health issues like anxiety and depression in the perinatal period (i.e., during pregnancy and in the first postnatal year). These issues are costly to women, families and the wider community. Clinical practice guidelines recommend mothers receive mental health screening both during pregnancy and in the first postnatal year.

Australia has made a substantial investment in perinatal mental health screening, yet trends over time and current rates of screening are unknown.

In the absence of national government data collection, this is the only study in Australia capable of tracking perinatal mental health screening.

What did the researchers do:

We used a large, nationally representative cohort of women to track trends in perinatal screening from 2000 to 2017, and investigated factors associated with not being screened according to clinical practice guidelines.

The research involved 7566 mothers from the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health reporting on 9384 children. We asked mothers if a health professional had asked them any questions about their emotional wellbeing during pregnancy or after birth, including being given a questionnaire.

We then mapped screening rates over time from 2000 to 2017, and compared these to policy initiatives and clinical practice guidelines.

We then looked at the most recent five years of data (2013-2017) to determine which women were missing out on the recommended screening (i.e., both during pregnancy and in the first postnatal year).

What did the research find:

There were substantial improvements in screening rates: the percentage of women screened according to clinical practice guidelines (i.e., both during and after pregnancy) increased from 21.3% in 2000 to 79.3% in 2017.

Improvements coincided with the introduction of two national policy initiatives (Perinatal Mental Health Action Plan and the National Perinatal Depression Initiative), suggesting these policies influenced clinical practice.

However, there were state-based differences in the timing of improvements. Changes occurred first in New South Wales, with Victoria 1-2 years behind and Queensland 2-3 years behind.

Also, in 2017, 1 in 5 women did not receive the recommended screening. Mothers who had previously reported emotional distress were 23% less likely and older mothers were 35% less likely to be screened both during and after pregnancy.

How can you use this research:

Mothers are in frequent contact with health care professionals during pregnancy and in the first postnatal year. This opportunity to ask about mental health and identify mothers at risk is too important to be missed.