

Are Pregnant Women in South Carolina *Stressed Out*?

Psychological stress can affect a woman's health in many different ways. A pregnant woman may also be putting her *unborn child* at risk if she endures everyday stress or unexpected stress and does not handle it well. Common responses to emotional stress include smoking, drinking, poor diet, lack of exercise, unsafe sexual practices, and poor hygienic practices.¹ Poor health practices, such as these, can adversely affect an unborn child. In addition, there are several theories that stress may be biologically linked with preterm birth (the infant is born too early) and/or intrauterine growth retardation (the infant does not develop as fast as it should).^{2,3,4}

Social support (help and support from friends, family members, or her partner) may be a very important factor in helping a woman cope with stress in her life. This pamphlet details the prevalence of stressful life events and social support among SC mothers delivering live infants in 1996.

What is SC PRAMS?

The information for this pamphlet was taken from the South Carolina Pregnancy Risk Assessment Monitoring System (SC PRAMS) Survey. SC PRAMS is an ongoing mail/telephone survey that obtains information from new mothers shortly after they deliver. About 2,000 mothers are randomly sampled from the state's live birth registry each year. Very low birthweight infants (less than 3 ½ pounds at birth) and moderately low birthweight infants (between 3 ½ and 5 ½ pounds at birth) are over-sampled because we need to learn more about high risk mothers. After statistical weights are applied, inferences can be made about the health of mothers and babies in SC.

The data presented in this pamphlet reflect live births to SC mothers occurring in SC in 1996. The overall response rate for 1996 was 73%, yielding information from 2,075 new mothers (representing 47,515 mothers).

How were Stress and Social Support measured?

The PRAMS Survey asks the woman if she experienced any of the thirteen listed events in the twelve months before she delivered her baby. This list is made up of events that are considered stressful to a pregnant mother. The events and the proportion of women that experienced each event during this time period are presented in Table 1. The total number of events experienced by SC women during pregnancy is presented in Table 2.

Another question on the PRAMS Survey asks whether the woman would have had certain kinds of help if she needed it during her pregnancy. This help is sometimes called "social support". The proportion of women that would have had each type of help are presented in Table 3.

There are some large differences in the proportion of black women experiencing certain life events and receiving certain types of social support in comparison to white women, therefore, the tables present percentages separately for these two groups. Very few women of races other than white or black answered the survey, thus, only white and black mothers are included in these tables.

Table 1. Stressful Life Events Experienced during the 12 Months before Delivery, 1996

Stressful Life Event	Black Women	White Women
Argued more often with husband/partner	49.4%	28.0%
A lot of bills that could not be paid	36.4%	27.7%
Someone close died	28.8%	21.8%
Someone close had a bad problem with drinking/drugs	21.1%	16.5%
Divorced or separated from husband/partner	17.8%	10.0%
Close family member was sick and had to go into the hospital	28.7%	30.9%
Involved in a physical fight	12.7%	6.0%
Woman was homeless	2.7%	2.0%
Woman or husband/partner went to jail	11.7%	4.2%
Husband lost his job	16.2%	11.9%
Woman lost her job	12.6%	10.8%
Moved to a new address	32.2%	40.3%
Husband/partner did not want pregnancy	18.5%	9.8%

Table 2. Total Number of Stressful Life Events, 1996

Total Number of Stressful Life Events	Black Women	White Women
None	11.8%	19.6%
1-2	39.0%	45.9%
3-5	36.0%	25.6%
6-18	13.2%	8.9%

Table 3. Prevalence of Social Support during Pregnancy, 1996

Support Issue	Black Women	White Women
Someone to loan her money	65.5%	85.7%
Someone to help if she had to remain in bed	85.7%	90.0%
Someone to give her a ride	88.2%	92.9%
Someone to talk to	79.0%	88.8%
Someone to help her find a job	62.3%	81.4%
Someone to help her with chores	79.6%	87.1%

Results

- ± A greater proportion of **black women** than white women experienced almost **every stressful life event** covered by the survey question.
- ± Almost **50%** of black women experienced **three or more** stressful life events during the twelve months before delivery, whereas, only about **35%** of white women experienced this many events.

± A greater proportion of **white women** than black women had **social support** in all areas covered by the survey question.

During the twelve months before delivery, **black women** were...

- ' **1.8 times more likely** to have **argued** more frequently with their husband or partner
- ' **1.9 times more likely** to have a husband or partner that **did not want the pregnancy**
- ' **2.0 times more likely** to have been involved in a **physical fight**
- ' **2.8 times more likely** to have their husband, partner, or themselves **jailed**

...than white women.

Conclusion

It is evident that SC women experience a multitude of stressful events during pregnancy. Although many of these stressful life events are beyond human control, it may be possible to reduce the negative effects that stress may have on the body by getting help and support from others. It is also apparent that *many women do not have help available during pregnancy*. It is important to make sure that women not only have **medical support**, but also **social support** to help them through their pregnancies.

References

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Acknowledgments

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