



## MEDIA RELEASE

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### Baby sleep problems affect mothers' health

A new study has found sleep problems are common in 3-6 month old infants and this can affect mothers' physical and mental health. Previous research has focused on older babies 6-12 months old, with a third of parents experiencing problems during this period. This new Australian study has found problems with infant sleeping can actually start much earlier.

The study by Dr Jordana Bayer and colleagues, from the Centre for Community Child Health at the Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne and the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute, is in the Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health (JPCH), the peer reviewed journal of the Paediatrics Division of The Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP).

The study used baseline data from the Infant Sleep Study, a cluster randomised trial in Victoria, Australia. A survey was completed by 692 mothers with babies 3-6 months of age.

The study found 34% reported an infant sleep problem, of whom 31% rated the problem as severe. Sleep patterns that parents considered a problem included the infant waking seven nights per week, nursing the infant to sleep at the beginning of the night, and the infant sleeping in the parent's room. Parental disagreement regarding managing infant sleep made the sleep problem worse. Mental and physical health were poorer in mothers reporting an infant sleep problem, regardless of socioeconomic status.

"Tiredness after the birth of a child is frequently dismissed by health professionals. Yet our data suggest tiredness or poor sleep quality impacts on maternal health. Interrupted sleep patterns place mothers at risk of overload and dysfunction making it difficult to provide adequate physical and emotional care for their infant," Dr Bayer said.

Helping mothers with their babies' sleep patterns, such as gradually teaching the baby how to self-soothe and settle to sleep, can reduce both infant sleep problems and maternal depression. Further practical solutions include organising regular breaks so a mother can catch up on sleep and establishing support to complete practical daily tasks thereby allowing a mother to rest.

"Health professionals need to inquire routinely about infant sleep, as well as mothers' mental and physical health, in the first few months of life. Early strategies may include starting to avoid habits that can link to later sleep problems (such as adults nursing infants to sleep), encouraging infants to self settle after night-time wakings and feedings, and arranging regular child care breaks for mothers during the daytime."

The RACP is responsible for training, educating and representing over 9,000 physicians in Australia and New Zealand. The RACP represents 25 medical specialties including paediatrics, public health and occupational medicine. Physicians are often called specialists and are doctors who have completed an extra six years or more of training after their initial medical training and choose to specialise in a particular area of medicine.

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*The views expressed in the Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health do not reflect the official views of The Royal Australasian College of Physicians.*