

Mental Health and Substance Use in Mothers Living with HIV

Mothers living with HIV sometimes have stressful lives. They may be at risk for mental health problems. These problems could include sadness, hopelessness, worrying, or problems with alcohol or drugs. We wanted to find out whether mothers living with HIV have high rates of mental health problems. We also wanted to see whether they receive treatment for these issues.

Who we studied

1,341 women whose children visited medical clinics where the SMARTT study is done

- 1,223 mothers living with HIV
- 128 HIV-negative mothers

What we did

We asked all 1,341 mothers questions about their emotions, behaviors, alcohol and drug use, and other health problems. Mothers noted whether those problems made it hard for them to care for their families. 689 of the mothers living with HIV also completed a follow-up interview several years later.

What we found

- At the first evaluation, 35% of all mothers had mental health problems. This is higher than the national average for adults.
 - There were no differences in rates of mental health or substance use problems between mothers living with HIV and HIV-negative mothers from similar communities.
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was the most common problem reported by mothers. This was because of high rates of traumatic events in their lives.

- There were 238 mothers with mental health problems at the first evaluation. Of these, **61%** still had mental health problems at their follow-up evaluation.
- Mothers living with HIV were **more likely** to have ongoing mental health problems if:
 - it was hard for them to do normal daily activities;
 - they had lower income; or
 - they had used alcohol or illegal drugs during their pregnancy.
- Most (83%) mothers with mental health problems were **not** receiving mental health care.

What we learned

Mothers living with HIV are at risk for mental health problems. These problems may also be related to traumatic or stressful events in their lives, unstable resources, or a lack of support. Sometimes these problems go on for several years.

Effective treatment is needed for mothers living with HIV to help them feel better, stay healthy, and care for their children. Mental health care integrated with medical care may improve their access and reduce barriers to treatment.

Reference Info:

Concept Sheet #C052
2014. *JAIDS* 65(5), pp. 526-534.



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