STUDY SHOWS A PHYSICAL THERAPY EXERCISE PROGRAM CAN REDUCE RISK
OF POSTNATAL DEPRESSION IN NEW MOTHERS

Postnatal depression affects 13% of all new mothers

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
March 22, 2010

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ALEXANDRIA, VA – A physical therapy exercise and health education program is effective in improving postnatal well-being and reducing the risk for postnatal depression (PND), according to a randomized controlled trial published in the March issue of Physical Therapy, (PTJ) the scientific journal of the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA).

Postnatal depression (PND) is a major health issue affecting up to 13% of all new mothers throughout the world, with most cases beginning in the first 3 months of the postnatal period. Although its duration varies among mothers, it is thought to be determined by sociocultural factors, such as self-esteem of the mother, the childbirth experience, and the availability of support and local services¹.

Previous studies have shown that general exercise improves mood states in younger² and older women³, improves well-being⁴, and leads to a reduction in depressive symptoms in mothers diagnosed with PND⁵. However, no studies have evaluated the benefits of group physical therapy exercise approaches to improve psychological health outcomes of women postnatally.

“Giving birth involves many changes in a woman’s physical, emotional, and social health,” said Mary P. Galea, BAppSci (Physio), BA, PhD, Professor of Clinical Physiotherapy in the School of Physiotherapy at the University of Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, one of the authors of this study. “A group exercise program led by a physical therapist, who is an expert in improving and restoring motion to people’s daily lives, can help mothers who may be at risk for PND improve their well-being and enable them to better care for their children.”

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In this study, 161 English-speaking women who were being discharged from the postnatal ward of The Angliss Hospital were randomly assigned to an experimental Mother & Baby (M&B) Program or an education only (EO) group. Once a week for 8 weeks the M&B group, comprised of 62 women, undertook 1 hour of exercise with their babies, facilitated by a women’s health physical therapist, combined with 30 minutes of parenting education delivered by health care professionals. Seventy-three women were assigned to the EO group and received only the same written educational materials. Twenty-six of the women did not receive either of the allocated interventions.

Results revealed there was significant improvement in well-being scores and depressive symptoms of the M&B group compared with the EO group over the study period. More specifically, there was a significant positive effect on well-being scores and depressive scores at 8 weeks, and this score was maintained 4 weeks after completion of the program. The number of women identified as at risk for postnatal depression pre-intervention was reduced by 50 percent by the end of the intervention.

The primary outcome measure was a psychological well-being scale called the Positive Affect Balance Scale. This 10-question scale indicates psychological reactions of people in the general population to events in their daily lives. Participants also completed the Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale and answered questions regarding the amount of physical activity performed each week. These outcome measures were assessed at baseline, after 8 weeks, and then 4 weeks later.

The American Physical Therapy Association (APTA) represents more than 74,000 physical therapists, physical therapist assistants, and students of physical therapy nationwide. Learn more about conditions physical therapists can treat and find a physical therapist in your area at www.moveforwardpt.com. Consumers are encouraged to follow us on Twitter (@moveforwardpt) and Facebook.

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2 Annesi JJ. Mood states of formerly sedentary younger and older women at weeks 1 and 10 of a moderate exercise program. *Psychol Rep.* 2004;94(3 pt 2):1337–1342.[CrossRef][Web of Science][Medline]