Premature babies risk mental health problems, say experts

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Premature or low birthweight babies are more than three times more likely to suffer from anxiety and mood disorders in adolescence than full-term infants, according to psychologists at the University of Birmingham.

Professor Stephen Wood, working with co-investigators at the University of Melbourne in Australia, conducted a meta-analysis of ten studies into mental health outcomes in children born prematurely.

The research, published in Psychological Medicine, found that youngsters who were born early or were underweight at birth were at 'significantly increased risk' of mental health disorders, particularly during their teens.

In the general population psychiatric disorders such as anxiety, depression and psychosis often emerge around puberty although these may be preceded by emotional and behavioural disturbances in childhood.

'As more and more of these babies survive and their physical problems are combated, we are seeing an apparent increase in mood and anxiety disorders,' explains Professor Wood. *'It would appear that the earlier a baby is born the more chance there is of problems of this nature occurring.'*

This is the first time there has been concrete evidence from the whole field that this is an issue, he adds. 'While conditions such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) have been known to be a problem in this group, this shows that the chance of developing other mental disorders is also increased.

'While we cannot as yet be sure of the cause of this problem in pre-term babies – indeed there could be multiple causes – we believe one factor could be how early life trauma affects the way the brain handles stress, and we are now exploring this in more detail,' says Professor Wood.

While parents should not be alarmed, the researchers say, they should be aware of what to look out for. *'We believe it is important to raise awareness of this issue and pay attention to it. It is easy to ignore or miss the signs and early care is extremely helpful. Being aware can increase the likelihood of mood disorders being diagnosed and tackled. There are many services available for young people and we would recommend psychological therapies for young people rather than medication.'*

They team concludes: *'In addition to monitoring and management of medical and cognitive problems, the psychological well-being of pre-term/low birthweight individuals should be a key part of ongoing care.*

'Medical professionals involved in the care of survivors of preterm/low birthweight are perfectly positioned to assist these vulnerable individuals as they navigate the challenges of adolescence and young adulthood.'

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Notes to Editors

• Prevalence of psychiatric diagnoses in preterm and full-term children, adolescents and young adults: a meta-analysis.

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