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Melanie Marquez

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Otsuki (St. Petersburg, Fla.) December 22, 2009 – Maternal depression can worsen asthma symptoms in children with this condition, according to research led by Assistant Professor of Psychology Michiko Otsuki and published in a recent issue of the Journal of Pediatric Psychology.

Otsuki led the research as a behavioral medicine research fellow at the Pulmonary and Critical Care Division of Johns Hopkins University before joining the USF St. Petersburg faculty in 2007.

Analyzing data from interviews with 262 mothers of African-American children with asthma — a population disproportionately affected by this inflammatory airway disorder — the investigators found that those whose mothers had severe depressive symptoms had more frequent asthma symptoms during a six-month follow-up. Conversely, children whose mothers reported milder depressive symptoms had fewer asthma episodes. But while maternal depression appeared to aggravate a child’s asthma, the opposite was not true: How often a child had symptoms did not seem to affect the severity of the mother’s depressive symptoms, an important finding that suggests maternal depression is an independent risk factor that can portend a child’s symptoms, according to the study.

"For many families, mom is the one who must implement the doctor’s recommendations for treatment and follow-up and if she is depressed she can’t do it well, so the child will suffer," Otsuki said.

Treating depressed mothers whose children are at high-risk for asthma complications will likely benefit both mother and child, researchers say, while providing a clear treatment target to help reduce the burden of asthma in the United States. Asthma is the country’s leading pediatric chronic illness, affecting 6.5 million children under the age of 18, according to the CDC.

Researchers caution that the mothers in their study were merely screened for depression with a standard questionnaire. Screening questionnaires, while reliable detectors, are not diagnostic tools.

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