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Parents' anxiety, depression may lead to kids being fussy eaters

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(Reuters Health) - Preschoolers are more likely to be fussy eaters if a parent had anxiety or depression during pregnancy or early in the child's life, suggests a new study from the Netherlands.

"Fussy eating can really be a problem for the families," said lead author Lisanne de Barse, of Erasmus MC-University Medical Center in Rotterdam. "Dinners can become very difficult. There is also some evidence that when a child continues to be a fussy eater there can continue to be additional health problems.”

Previously, fussy eating has been tied to constipation, weight problems and behavioral problems, the researchers write in the Archives of Disease in Childhood.

"It’s not clear what influences fussy eating," de Barse told Reuters Health. "What we knew is that there was a relationship between mothers’ anxiety and depression during the child’s life and their children’s fussy eating.”

But researchers didn't know whether anxiety and depression likely led to fussy eating, or if fussy eating led to mothers' mental health problems.

For the new study, the researchers used data from the Generation R study, which followed pregnant women living in Rotterdam who delivered their child between April 2002 and January 2006.

Mothers and fathers answered questionnaires about their anxiety and depression during pregnancy and again when their children were three years old. The parents then reported about their children's eating behaviors at age three and four years.

The researchers had data on 4,746 mother and child pairs. They also had data on 4,144 fathers.

By age three, about 30 percent of children were fussy eaters.

Overall, the researchers found, mothers' anxiety and depression during and after pregnancy were tied to an increased risk of their children being fussy eaters.

On average, for example, for every point a mother's score increased on an anxiety scale that ranged from zero to four, her child's score increased about one point on a fussy eating scale that ranged from six to 30.

The researchers also note that the increased risk of fussy eating is not limited to kids whose parents had clinically significant anxiety, but also those with slightly elevated anxiety.

“For clinicians, it’s important to consider that not only severe anxiety and depressions symptoms of parents play a role in fussy eating," de Barse said.

Fathers' anxiety during their kids' early childhood was also associated with fussy eating, the researchers found.

"Both mother and father symptoms were related to picky eating," said de Barse. "The only difference was father anxiety during pregnancy wasn’t related to fussy eating.”

The researchers say their study suggests fussy eating is a result of parental anxiety and depression since their data was collected before the children were born.

De Barse cautioned that people shouldn't be too concerned if their children are fussy eaters, because "fussy eating is usually a normal phase of development. It usually peaks around two years and declines during childhood."

However, there are some children in whom fussy eating persists.

"For parents themselves, when they experience anxiety or depression they should report that to their doctors because it could have an impact on themselves and their child," de Barse said.

SOURCE: [bit.ly/1SfICCW](http://bit.ly/1SfICCW) Archives of Disease in Childhood, February 22, 2016.