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The prevalence of postnatal depression among mothers in Malaysia: Are there any changes after 5 years?

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Introduction

Postnatal depression was defined as a period of depressive symptoms ranging from moderate to severe intensity typically emerge four weeks following childbirth and can persist for up to 12 months after delivery. (1) A meta-regression analysis from 80 countries revealed that the postnatal depression prevalence varied substantially among countries and regions, with the lowest from 6.48% in Denmark to the highest, 60.93% in Afghanistan. (2) In recent years, there has been an increased risk of postnatal mothers experiencing symptoms of depression due to various factors. Previous studies in Malaysia found that the prevalence of postnatal depression was range from 4.4% to 14.29%. (1, 3, 4) To address the issue of postnatal depression in Malaysia, it is essential to consistently monitor the present prevalence and patterns.

Objective

- To determine the prevalence of postnatal depression and its relationship with sociodemographic factors among mothers with infants aged 6-16 weeks in Malaysia in 2022.

- To determine the pattern of postnatal depression among mothers with infants aged 6-16 weeks in Malaysia with previous year.

Method

Data were obtained from the National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) 2022: Maternal and Child Health, a cross-sectional study which employed a two-stage random sampling technique. About 663 postnatal mothers aged from 15-59 years old responded to the validated screening tool, The Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale (EPDS). The EPDS was used for assessment of postnatal depression through self-administration by the mothers. Postnatal depression was defined by a positive score on item 10 (The thought of harming myself has occurred to me) or a total EPDS score of 12 and above. The relationship between postnatal depression and sociodemographic factors was analysed using a chi-square test.

Results

- Overall, 10.4% of postnatal mothers were identified as having a postnatal depression upon screening (Table 1)

- The prevalence was higher among single mothers in comparison to married or cohabiting mothers ($\chi2$ = 9.604, p=0.001).

- There was no significant difference (p>0.05) observed in the prevalence of postnatal depression by household income group, education status, and working status.
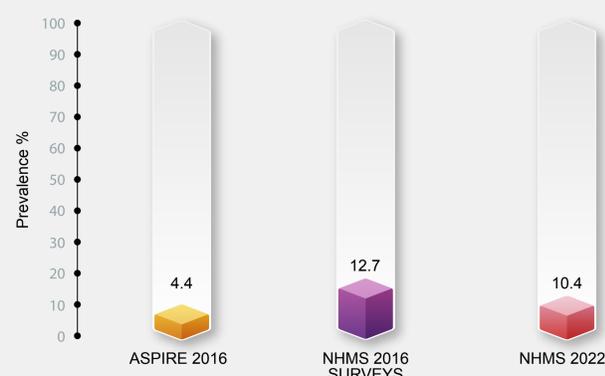
Table 1: The prevalence of postnatal depression among mothers with child aged 6-16 weeks, 2023

Socio-demographic characteristic	Count (n)	Estimated Population	Prevalence (%)	95% Confidence Interval Lower	Upper	p-value
Overall	64	8630	**10.4**	7.89	13.58	
Strata						
Urban	50	6495	10.8	7.89	14.56	`0.672
Rural	14	2135	9.4	5.20	16.32	
Ethnicity						
Malay	45	5574	9.3	6.66	12.94	0.060
Chinese	1	119	3.1	0.41	19.34	
Indian	6	739	23.5	10.15	45.45	
Other Bumiputera	9	1569	15.4	8.80	25.48	
Others	2	261	5.3	1.13	21.55	
Citizenship						
Malaysian	61	8001	10.4	7.90	13.49	0.408
Non-Malaysian	2	261	5.6	1.18	22.63	
Marital status						
Married/ co-habiting	61	8050	10.0	7.57	12.98	0.001
Single/ separated/ widowed	3	212	70.0	17.15	96.34	
Education level						
No formal education	1	183	17.3	2.45	63.51	0.366
Primary education	5	810	16.3	6.14	36.86	
Secondary education	33	4414	11.5	8.03	16.12	
Tertiary education	23	2761	7.7	4.67	12.32	
Working status						
Government/ Semi-gov	6	781	7.0	2.50	18.32	0.857
Private	13	1786	10.5	5.71	18.42	
Employer/ self-employed	4	508	11.2	3.98	27.56	
Unpaid workers/ housewife/ student/ retiree	39	5093	10.6	7.50	14.71	
Household income						
Bottom 40 (B40)	53	6486	10.2	7.52	13.71	0.343
Middle 40 (M40)	9	1956	13.4	7.07	24.02	
Top 20 (T20)	2	188	4.2	0.99	16.23	

Discussion and Conclusions

- The prevalence of postnatal depression among mothers was lower compared to a nationwide survey in 2016. (3) However, the prevalence was higher compared to the findings from nationwide clinic-based cross-sectional study in 2016. (4) The discrepancy may stem from variations in the study settings and the demographic composition of the populations involved in these three studies.

- Single mothers exhibited a higher prevalence of postnatal depression, as reported. A study revealed that marital status demonstrated an independent correlation with postnatal depression. Nevertheless, once factors such as relationship quality were taken into account, the likelihood of depression in single mothers did not surpass that of married or cohabiting women.(5)

Recommendations

- Emphasizing the need for increased screening of pregnant mothers to identify early signs of depression.

- The presence of support from partners and family members has the potential to alleviate the symptoms of depression in mothers after giving birth. Educating both partners and family members could prove to be a beneficial approach in this regard.

Acknowledgement

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Figure 1: The prevalence of postnatal depression among Malaysian mothers reported by 3 national surveys.