

## The link between children's stomach ache and emotional problems

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A new study of persistent tummy ache in young children has come to the conclusion that for some it may be linked to emotional problems in their families.

Researchers say that doctors treating children for recurrent abdominal pain may need to consider psychological symptoms in those children and in their parents.

The findings, published in the journal *Pediatrics*, are based on the experiences of 10,200 families taking part in the Children of the 90s project based at the University of Bristol.

Oxford psychiatrist Dr Paul Ramchandani and his colleagues found that 55 per cent of six year-olds had complained of pains in their stomach at some time in the past year. 11.8 per cent had stomach ache at least five times in the year. It affected girls more than boys.

The researchers noticed a striking association over time. The children who complained of persistent pain at age 6 were often the same children who had complained of tummy ache at age 2.

When researchers examined the children's psychological assessments they found that those children were more than three times as likely to have emotional problems. Their mothers tended to have more symptoms of anxiety and depression

Dr Ramchandani says: "Recurrent abdominal pain is among the most common complaints of childhood.

"It is not usually associated with physical disease, although it is associated with complaints of other physical symptoms such as headache, and it seems to be higher among children with anxiety or with an anxious temperament."

"For many children the occasional stomach ache is all part of growing up and is usually a symptom of a childhood illness which can be treated normally. It is the recurrent stomach ache - which often seems to have no obvious cause - which we were investigating here."

"We need to consider carefully the possible role of parental distress and illness in some of these families. The fact that this seems to affect the same group of children across childhood - and may go on into adult life too - highlights how important it is to address these issues early in the child's life.

“This is the largest study of this problem in young children. The link we have shown between recurrent abdominal pain and emotional symptoms, in children and their parents, supports the view that doctors should be at least considering psychological factors in these cases.”

**The epidemiology of Recurrent Abdominal Pain from ages 2 to 6 years: results of a large population-based study.** *Paul Ramchandani, Matthew Hotopf, Alan Stein, Bhupinder Sandhu and the ALSPAC study team.*

#### NOTES

ALSPAC The Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (also known as Children of the 90s) is a unique ongoing research project based in the University of Bristol. It enrolled 14,000 mothers during pregnancy in 1991-2 and has followed most of the children and parents in minute detail ever since.

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