Prematurity at birth and adolescent depressive disorder

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Summary  Association between prematurity/low birthweight and adolescent depressive disorder studied using a case–control design within a prospective cohort study of 2032 adolescents. Odds for depressive disorder were 1.6-fold (95% CI 2–62) higher for the premature/low-birthweight participants after regression adjustment for major confounding factors. For premature/low-birthweight females, cumulative rates of depressive disorder over 30 months were 15.2% (95% CI 11.1–20.5) v. 1.8% (95% CI 1.6–2.1) in those with normal deliveries. Physiological adaptations in utero before full term may be implicated causally in some cases of depression in adolescence.

Declaration of interest  None.

Prematurity and low birthweight have been linked to IQ, attention deficit disorder and emotional problems in children (Bhutta et al., 2002). Two recent studies have suggested an association between birthweight and psychological distress in early adulthood (Cheung, 2003). Between August 1992 and July 1997). When mothers were unavailable (dead or uncontactable) this information was collected from fathers (5) or adoptive parents (1). Birthweight of <2.5 kg was categorised as low birthweight and delivery ≥3 weeks prior to term was categorised as premature.

Associations with depressive disorder were examined using conditional logistic regression (Stata, release 7.0), with matching defined by school and wave of selection. Inverse probability weighting was used to estimate the cumulative prevalence of depressive disorder, with 95% CIs obtained using Stata’s survey estimation procedures.

RESULTS

The cumulative rate of stable depressive disorder (CIS–R and CIDI) over 30 months was 2.1% (95% CI 1.8–2.5) in females and 0.33% (95% CI 0.19–0.54) in males. Cumulative rates of stable depressive disorder in those born at term and those of birthweight ≥2500 g were low: 0.25% (95% CI 0.13–0.5) in males and 1.8% (95% CI 1.6–2.1) in females. Rates were 1.0% (95% CI 0.8–1.3) in premature low-birthweight males and substantially higher at 15.2% (95% CI 11.1–20.5) in premature low-birthweight females.

Matched pairs or triplets for CIDI-defined depressive disorder (i.e. at least one case and one control from a specific school and wave of selection) were available with complete (parental response) data for 63 cases and 112 controls. For stable depressive disorder, 49 cases were matched with 102 controls. On bivariate analysis, prematurity and low birthweight were associated with approximately sixfold (OR = 5.7; 95% CI 1.4–2.3) and approximately threefold (OR = 2.9; 95% CI 0.6–1.4) increases in the odds of CIDI-defined depressive disorder, respectively.

The potential mediating roles of adverse parenting, heightened responses to social adversity and high levels of pre-existing symptoms were considered in further conditional logistic regression.
models (Table 1). The baseline odds ratio after adjustment for parental education, parental separation, maternal age at birth, maternal smoking in pregnancy, serious illness in the first year of life and parental depressive disorder suggested that either prematurity or low birthweight increased the odds for depressive disorder by >11-fold. Both low maternal care and high control were independently associated with depressive disorder but adjustment did not markedly reduce the association with prematurity/low birthweight. Adjustment for negative life events reduced the association with depressive disorder but the clearest reduction in association occurred with the addition of pre-existing depressive and anxiety symptoms to the model. Models using stable depression as the outcome produced similar findings.

**DISCUSSION**

Prematurity and low birthweight were associated with a substantially higher rate of depressive disorder in adolescence. After adjustment for potential confounders, the odds for depressive disorder were elevated by >11-fold in adolescents born premature or of low birthweight. For females, rates of stable disorder in those born premature or with low birthweight prevalence estimates were 15%, compared with <2% in those with normal deliveries.

Poor maternal bonding through childhood did not appear to be a mechanism for the association between prematurity and depressive disorder. However, adjustment of regression models for pre-existing depressive and anxiety symptoms and recent negative life events did reduce the association, suggesting that a heightened sensitivity to social adversity might play a role in depressive disorder in this group.

Fetal genotype, maternal physiology and placental function may affect early brain development through nutritional and hormonal mechanisms (Leon, 2001). For those born prematurely, perinatal stress and suboptimal nutrition in the early weeks ex utero also play a role. Early physiological adaptation, particularly of the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal axis (HPA), to intra-uterine nutritional deficiencies has been one explanation for the links between low birthweight and later cardiovascular and diabetes risks (Phillips et al, 1998). The HPA and hypothalamo–pituitary–gonadal axes have been implicated in early depression (Patton et al, 1996; Goodyer et al, 2000) and both are affected by low birthweight (Phillips et al, 1998; Ibanez et al, 2000). Thus, a tendency of premature/low-birthweight subjects to have high circulating glucocorticoids may indicate an early acquired and persisting neurophysiological vulnerability. Such a vulnerability may lower the threshold for depressive and anxiety symptoms in response to adversity and, in turn, lead to a more negative appraisal and heightened vulnerability to life events.

**REFERENCES**


