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NEWS

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JITTERY NEWBORNS MAY POSE SPECIAL PROBLEMS FOR PARENTS

Boston, Mass.--Jittery newborns are likely to be less attentive and more difficult to console than non-jittery newborns and, therefore, may pose special caretaking problems for parents, according to a study published in the January issue of Pediatrics. Jitteriness, which is characterized by involuntary tremor-like movements of the arms and legs, is the most common involuntary movement of healthy full-term infants. Despite its prevalence--almost half of the infants in this study exhibited jitteriness--its significance has largely been unclear.

Researchers from the Division of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics at Boston City Hospital (BCH) and Boston University School of Medicine (BUSM) who conducted the study found that jitteriness may indicate that a newborn is neurologically more disorganized than a non-jittery newborn.

"Based on these findings, jitteriness should serve as a clue that an infant may be initially more difficult to care for," says Steven Parker, M.D., the principal investigator of the study and an assistant professor of pediatrics at BUSM. Parker suggests that pediatricians who identify a newborn's jitteriness carefully evaluate other aspects of the infant's behavior, especially their visual attentiveness and ease of consolability. "A pediatrician who recognizes jitteriness and its implications can play an important role in guiding parents' responses to their infants and in helping them develop a positive early relationship with their child," he says.

In their evaluation of 936 healthy infants born to women receiving prenatal care at the Women and Adolescent Prenatal Clinics at BCH, Parker and

his colleagues also assessed the clinical significance of jitteriness in relation to mothers' use of cigarettes, alcohol, marijuana and cocaine. Neither cigarette nor alcohol use was associated with jitteriness. Parker says there was a small association between marijuana and cocaine use and jitteriness.

"Most people have believed that jitteriness is a reliable, clinical indicator of any kind of maternal drug use during pregnancy, particularly cocaine use," says Parker. "Although we did observe a slight increase of jittery behavior in healthy newborns exposed to marijuana and cocaine, the magnitude of this effect was small. Jitteriness does not appear to be a useful marker for exposure to cocaine, marijuana, cigarettes or alcohol." In contrast, a sample of infants whose mothers used such narcotics as heroin during pregnancy were significantly more jittery than infants who were not exposed to narcotics.

Pediatricians evaluating a jittery newborn should first rule out a medical cause for this behavior, since most jittery infants are not sick. However, the clinician should use the study's finding as an opportunity to help parents anticipate and adapt to their infant's early behaviors before problems occur, and to teach them effective ways to console their newborn. "Some infants are soothed by rocking, while others respond to being cuddled. It is important that pediatricians work with parents to find out what is best for their child," says Parker.

Boston City Hospital is a principal teaching hospital of Boston University School of Medicine.

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