Resolution of maternal grief following the experience of preterm birth, and the subsequent quality of maternal interactions, have important implications for attachment security development in premature infants, according to a study published online Jan. 17 in Pediatrics.

Prachi E. Shah, M.D., from the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, and colleagues looked at 74 preterm infants and their mothers to assess the association between infant preterm birth and infant-mother attachment security. They analyzed neonatal and socioeconomic risks at discharge from the neonatal intensive care unit, maternal depression, Reaction to Preterm Birth Interview findings, quality of parenting at post-term age of 9 months, and infant-mother attachment at post-term age of 16 months.

The researchers found an association between unresolved grief and insecure infant-mother attachment. After controlling for other variables, maternal feelings of resolved grief regarding a preterm birth experience were associated with a secure infant-mother attachment at 16 months. Maternal grief resolution and quality of infant-mother interaction were independent predictors of attachment security, and mothers with resolved grief after preterm birth were more likely to have securely attached infants, compared with those with unresolved grief (odds ratio, 2.94).

"This study suggests that resolution of grief regarding preterm birth and the quality of early parent-infant interactions are significant predictors of infant attachment security for infants born preterm," the authors write.

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