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### **UW Study: Mothers of Tiny Babies Suffer, Too**

**Madison, Wis.** — Babies born at very low birth weights struggle in their early years and a new study by University of Wisconsin-Madison researchers suggests that their mothers do, too.

The study of families enrolled in the Newborn Lung Project found that by the time the children reached age 5, their mothers suffered much worse health than mothers of normal birth-weight children.

“We found that caring for a baby born very low birth weight can have negative downstream effects for maternal health,” says study leader Dr. Whitney Witt, assistant professor of population health sciences at UW School of Medicine and Public Health. “This suggests that mothers of these babies, and their families, should get help and support both early on and as the child grows up, in order to keep the whole family healthy.”

Witt led a research team that interviewed 297 mothers of very low birth-weight babies – defined as babies born weighing less than 1,500 grams or about 3.3 pounds – and 290 mothers of normal birth-weight babies. The Newborn Lung Study includes all very low birth-weight infants born in Wisconsin in 2003 and 2004 and admitted to Neonatal Intensive Care Units (NICU). They found that:

- Mothers of very low birth-weight children had worse physical health than mothers of normal birth-weight children, partially because of the increased stress experienced by mothers of children born very low birth weight.
- Among mothers of very low birth-weight children, the higher the number of weeks the baby spent in a NICU, the worse the mother’s physical health when

the child was age 5. This relationship was independent of whether the mother herself had health problems during pregnancy.

- The mothers of very low birth-weight children who had behavioral problems at age 2 had worse mental health years later. This appears to be partially due to greater levels of stress experienced by mothers of children with behavior problems.

“This study suggests that having a child born very low birth-weight can have a lasting effect on mothers, and long-term or chronic stress may play a very important role,” says Witt. “This is important information for pediatric and family medicine clinicians, so they can monitor, refer, and treat these at-risk mothers as needed.”

Other members of the team include Kristin Litzelman, Lauren E. Wisk and Nataliya Levin, graduate students, and Dr. Mari Palta, professor, all of the UW Department of Population Health Sciences; and Hilary Spear and Beth McManus of the University of Colorado.

The research was funded by the National Institutes of Health, the UW Graduate School and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and is published online in the journal *Quality of Life Research* (<http://www.springerlink.com/content/xt405276u215642m/>).

Dr. Witt is affiliated with the [Waisman Center](#), the [Institute for Research on Poverty](#) and the [Center for Demography and Ecology](#).

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