



# Maternal Attitudes, Adjustment, Health Behaviors, and Social Support Among Mothers of Infants in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit

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## INTRODUCTION

Neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) admission rates in the U.S. have increased in recent years (Harrison & Goodman, 2015).

10-15% of infants born in the U.S. each year are treated in a NICU (March of Dimes Perinatal Data Center, 2011).

NICU hospitalization is a stressful experience for parents (Baía et al., 2016), as they face challenges, including:

- navigating the medical system
- physical separation from their infant
- managing existing family/job responsibilities

Psychological symptoms are prevalent among NICU mothers, attachment and bonding is comprised in the NICU environment, and the postpartum period is already a vulnerable time for adverse psychological outcomes.

We examined the relationships among maternal attitudes, adjustment to motherhood, health behaviors, social support, and psychological functioning in NICU mothers.

## METHODS

NICU mothers ( $N=127$ ) were recruited from 3 NICUs in the Philadelphia area and participated in a quantitative, cross-sectional study

### Measures

- Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1996)
- Maternal Attitudes and Maternal Adjustment Questionnaire (MAMA; Kumar et al., 1984)
- Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Zimet et al., 1988)
- Multidimensional Health Behavior Inventory (MHBI; Kulbok et al., 1999)

**Positive attitudes about motherhood, more perceived social support, and health-promoting behaviors were negatively associated with depressive, anxiety, and stress symptoms in NICU mothers**

## RESULTS

Majority of participants were White (52%), married (54%), with an average age of 29.63 years old ( $SD = 5.2$ , range = 18-41).

NICU mothers reported a range of attitudes towards motherhood, specifically regarding body image, somatic symptoms, and their baby. They also reported on various health behaviors such as exercise and sleep. They generally perceived high levels of social support.

Statistically significant bivariate correlations revealed that maternal attitudes, perceived social support, and health-promoting variables were negatively correlated with anxiety, stress, and depressive symptoms.



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## DISCUSSION

Certain modifiable maternal variables, such as maternal attitudes, social support, and health behaviors, are related to psychological functioning among NICU mothers.

Findings suggest that developing and implementing unique programs and interventions that target these variables in the NICU setting may benefit mothers, families, and infants.

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