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IN THE NEWS

How anxiety is linked to the amount of stress your mother suffers during pregnancy

- *Researchers at the University of Edinburgh found mothers' wombs and babies' brains contain a chemical protecting them from a mother's stress*
- *But some women lack this chemical exposing their unborn babies to stress*
- *Those exposed appear to be more susceptible to anxiety and depression*

By Fiona Macrae

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If you are struggling to cope with the pressures of another Monday morning, blame your mother.

Researchers claim to have discovered why some people are more prone to suffering from stress and anxiety than others – they shared their mother's stress while still in the womb.

Normally, the placenta, the baby's lifeline as it grows in the womb, protects it from hormones that build up in the mother's blood when she is stressed. In some women, however, the protection is weak and the harmful hormones cross from mother to baby.

Pregnancy: Research suggests that women who lack a protective enzyme in the womb affect their unborn children with their stresses. Edinburgh University researcher Professor Jonathan Seckl said: 'There is an enzyme found in high levels in the placenta and the baby's brain. It seems to be a natural barrier to stress hormones and it deactivates them.

'If you inhibit this barrier then you start to get children with a low birth weight who have altered stress responses and depression. 'This may be what underpins the variation you get from one individual to another.'

The research suggests that babies exposed to their mother's stress later in pregnancy are more likely to develop depression or be susceptible to PTSD.

It is thought that the protective barrier can be overwhelmed by high levels of stress in pregnancy. In other cases, some women may not make enough of the barrier enzyme to begin with.

Once the stress hormones have breached the barrier, they can affect the delicate developing brain and trigger changes that leave the child prone to anxiety and behavioural problems as he or she grows up.

Curiously, eating large amounts of liquorice in pregnancy may have the same effect. Professor Seckl has shown that mothers-to-be who gorge on the sweet treat seem to raise the odds of their unborn child becoming anxious and badly behaved.

He said: 'When we looked at Finnish women – who tend to eat a lot of liquorice – those who ate a bag a day compared with those who did not tended to have babies born a couple of days earlier.

'By the age of eight, we saw a two-thirds increase in the rates of attention deficits and anxiety behaviours.'

It is thought that a compound in liquorice helps break down the protective barrier, allowing stress hormones to pass from mother to child.

Stress in the womb may also have long-term effects on the unborn child's physical health.

A recent study of English mothers-to-be found that going through a major upheaval, such as a bereavement or separation, dramatically raised the odds of their baby suffering ill-health by the age of four.