

Positive Mental Health Screens in Families and Subsequent Emergency Department Utilization

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INTRODUCTION:

Mental health problems in families are associated with adverse outcomes including increased health care utilization. How internalizing and externalizing mental health problems in children effect Emergency Department (ED) utilization is unknown. Furthermore, whether or not the additional burden of a maternal mental health problem exacerbates this association is unclear. We hypothesized that mothers and children who screen positive for a mental health disorders will have higher utilization of the emergency room than those who screen negative for mental health disorders.

METHODS:

480 mother/child dyads who were screened for mental health disorders in the pediatric ED between 2000 and 2002 were followed for three years to determine ED healthcare utilization. Child mental health disorders were obtained using both a parent and child report. At the same time, maternal mental health status was ascertained. Patients were followed for three years after the initial ED based mental health screen to examine number of subsequent emergency room visits, acuity of visit, tests ordered, and number of hospital admissions. Children with 4 or more ED visits were placed in a high utilization group while those with less than 4 visits were placed in the lower utilization group

RESULTS: There was no association between maternal mental health screening and pediatric ED utilization. In addition, there was no association between child mental health screening and ED utilization as reported by the parent. However, there was an association between child who screened positive for an internalizing and externalizing disorder and ED utilization as reported by the child. Furthermore, children with internalizing disorders had the highest ED utilization in all categories.

CONCLUSIONS: Child reported mental health screens may play an important role in the identification and intervention of a group at risk for being high utilizers of ED care. Maternal mental health status and maternal reported child mental health status do not appear to be related to ED health care utilization.