

WHO: Women with stress will deliver unhealthy kids

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It's official — stressed out women give birth to unhealthy babies.

After the World Health Organisation (WHO) recommended that the role of maternal stress during pregnancy be given high research priority, an international study has found that babies born to women with high stress levels were more likely to develop mental, behavioral and developmental disorders, apart from asthma and infections.

The researchers, whose study was published in the journal *Environmental Health Perspectives*, followed more than 65,000 pregnant women in Denmark, and assessed their babies after they were born.

Compared to women who were happy and

cheerful, women who were under emotional stress gave birth to babies with increased risk of diseases in the eye, ear, respiratory system, digestive system, skin, muscular and urino-genital systems in women, the researchers found.

Babies born to such mothers were also at higher risk of developing mental disorders during the first two-and-a-half years.

"We now know that all diseases, be it neurological, immunological or a lifestyle disorder, are all linked to the psyche," says neo-natologist and pediatrician Dr Deepa Hariharan.

"Emotional stress can induce hormonal changes in the mother, which alters the chemicals present in the blood flow to the fetus. These hormonal changes can adversely affect the normal growth

process of the baby's brain and body," said Dr Hariharan, pointing out that the chemical changes caused by stress can also affect the baby's immune system, making him susceptible to infections.

While most doctors have observed these affects in their practice, there has until now been no large-scale studies on the direct consequences of maternal stress.

Gynecologist Dr Nitya Ramamurthy from the Fortis Malar Hospital here stresses that all pregnant women have to be counseled through the 10 months of pregnancy.

"We explain to them the importance of being happy. We insist that the husbands accompany them to every hospital visit, and they are given diet charts and exercises that will help them combat stress," said Dr Ramamurthy.