

THE VIRUS STRESS TEST

EXCLUSIVE ANGELA POWNALL

An Australia-first study of 2000 Perth families began this week to find out the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on people's mental health, finances and family lives.

The families, who live in the Wanneroo and Joondalup regions of Perth's northern suburbs, will be quizzed about their health, wellbeing and changes to their daily life during lockdown and beyond.

Researchers plan to release the findings in as little as six months to shed light on how COVID-19 is affecting people and to guide governments and health authorities in the nation's recovery.

Professor Desiree Silva, who is leading the study, said she was concerned the pandemic and restrictions to stop its spread were causing many changes and difficulties in people's lives.

"There is certainly fear and stress," she said. "People not being in control of their lives any more and someone else is taking control and is directing them. That becomes quite confronting.

"There was panic-buying of foods. People

obviously got worried that they won't have enough. Being connected to other people is really important but (they are) not being allowed to do that or being able to gather."

Professor Silva, a paediatrician at Joondalup Health Campus, said she was concerned anxiety and loneliness could have a lasting impact on people.

"What you do in certain periods of time in your life may very well affect things later on," she said. "At the

research is an extension of the \$26 million Origins project between Joondalup Health Campus and Telethon Kids Institute, which is following 3000 pregnant women, their partners and their babies during the first five years of the child's life.

The 2000 families will complete a questionnaire every month while coronavirus restrictions are in place, and then every six months for up to five years.

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time you don't actually think that's the case.

"There are environmental impacts that happen at very critical times in a child or a pregnant mother's life that can cause what we call an epigenetic effect.

"You might switch a gene on because of the stress. We want to understand that and it's really important to support families through this."

The ground-breaking

study would also look for positive changes to come out of the pandemic, such as more family time.

Jamee Brien, from Butler, has been self-isolating with her three children, Chelsea, Mackenzie and Cooper, pictured, for five weeks because she and Cooper have asthma.

They have enjoyed daily bike rides while dad Daniel was at work but Mrs Brien said the changes had been hard.

