

Parenting and Pregnancy

Mental Health Prevention Starts in the Womb

Mental health problems tend to run in families because they have strong genetic roots. Genes are only half the story, however, and there's a lot you can do from conception to parenting to lower those risks and bring out the best in your family's genes.

The positive side of psychiatric genes

There's a reason that mental illness is so common. The same genes that cause problems like bipolar disorder and schizophrenia can also lead to strengths. For example, children who have genes for bipolar disorder also have greater creativity, intelligence, and leadership skills. That is, if those genes develop in the right direction.

The environment is what shapes that direction. One study followed children with a certain gene that was known to cause mental health problems. Some of those kids grew up to be CEOs and leaders, while others ended up in prison. What made the difference? The ones who went to prison experienced abuse in their early years, while the ones who thrived came from supportive families.

The same story unfolds with a gene that's thought to cause depression: the short-arm-serotonin gene (SERT). People with this gene have much higher rates of depression, but only if they go through childhood abuse or neglect, or severe stress as adults. Without those traumas, people with this gene are more secure in their relationships and better able to plan and solve problems.

Prevention in Pregnancy

1. Take care of your mental health

Active depression in the mother is a major risk for problems in the child. Depression is a physical illness, affecting everything from hormones to inflammation, and it poses risks even when the child is in the womb.

Medications are not the only way to prevent depression (see chrisaikenmd.com/brochures for more) but there are psychiatric medications that don't appear risky during pregnancy.

2. Avoid alcohol, nicotine, and other drugs

These worsen mental and physical outcomes in pregnancy.

3. Take care of your physical health

Maternal infections raise the risk of mental illness in the child. Get a regular flu shot, and avoid changing cat litter as it carries a parasite that is risky to pregnancy: toxoplasmosis (or keep cats in doors and wear gloves when changing it). Eat healthy; good brain food is at: chrisaikenmd.com/antidepressantdiet

4. Take a prenatal vitamin

These vitamins are high in folate, which prevents mental problems as well as physical ones like cleft palate (recommended dose 400-800mcg daily).

Choline, a component of brain cells, is another supplement with physical and mental benefits for the developing baby. Many people don't get the recommended amount from their diet. The American Medical Association has recommended adding choline to prenatal vitamins, but few have done so.

Top Choline-rich Foods

Choline supports brain development and is available as phosphatidylcholine. Good sources, with daily amounts to achieve 450mg, include:

Eggs (3), beef liver (4 oz), chicken or beef (18 oz), milk or yogurt (11 metric cups), quinoa (11 metric cups), broccoli or Brussels sprouts (15 cups).

Other good sources include:

Fish, beans (garbanzo, lima, kidney, lentils), vegetables (cabbage, asparagus, bok choy, peas, potatoes, mushrooms), seeds (sunflower, pumpkin), nuts (peanuts, almonds), grains (whole wheat bread, brown rice).

Avoid alcohol. It lowers choline.

Choline can be taken in a vitamin form called phosphatidylcholine (PIP). 3,000mg of PIP is the minimum recommended amount, and 6,300mg has been proven to help prevent mental illness in the developing pregnancy (e.g Country Life Phosphatidylcholine Complex).

Other supplements that lower psychiatric risks in the developing child include vitamin D₃ (600 IU daily), and vitamin A (2,500 IU daily). Higher doses are not better, and can carry risks, particularly with fat-soluble vitamins like A, D, E, and K.

5. Omega 3 or Fish?

Seafood is brain food, but the mercury in the fish is a problem during pregnancy and breastfeeding. Current recommendations are to eat 2-3 servings of low-mercury fish each week while pregnant or breastfeeding (see side bar).

It's not clear why fish are so good for the brain, but one lead is omega-3 fatty acids. These healthy fats coat and protect brain cells

and treat depression, irritability, and other mental health problems. However, it's not clear that supplementation with omega-3 is the best choice during pregnancy. In some studies it improves the child's mental health, but one study found higher rates of

ADHD with this supplement. Until we know more, it's best to stick with standard recommendations for fish or vegetarian sources (see sidebars).

Prevention after Pregnancy

The Early Years

Young babies need active involvement, interaction, and physical touch. This can come from parents or other caregivers, but parents

Low Mercury Fish

The FDA recommends 2-3 servings of these low mercury fish while pregnant or breast-feeding:

Anchovy, Atlantic croaker, Atlantic mackerel, Black sea bass, Butterfish, Catfish, Clam, Cod, Crab, Crawfish, Flounder, Haddock, Hake, Herring, Lobster, American and spiny, Mullet, Oyster, Pacific chub mackerel, Perch, Pickerel, Plaice, Pollock, Salmon, Sardine, Scallop, Shad, Shrimp, Skate, Smelt, Sole, Squid, Tilapia, Trout-freshwater, Tuna-canned light, Whitefish, Whiting.

Safecatch.com is a good source for safe fish.

Avoid raw fish, as well as any fish high in mercury, such as: Tilefish from the Gulf of Mexico, swordfish, shark, big-eye tuna, Marlin, and king mackerel.

with depression have a harder time engaging these needs. Parental mental health is so critical in the child's early years.

Breastfeeding is very good for the brain, even when taking medication. Breastfeeding even cancelled out the risks of Depakote, a mood stabilizer that has more risks in pregnancy than any psych med. Women who took this med had children with higher IQs when they breastfed, compared to women who took it without breastfeeding.

If you wake to breastfeed, try to do it in with brain-friendly night lights, and no other lights on. This strategy is known to prevent postpartum depression, and may be good for the baby as well (see chrisaikenmd.com/darktherapy).

Parenting Strategies

As children grow, there are strategies that can improve their mental health. They involve a good balance of love/empathy and structure/discipline, as well as outdoor activity, exercise, social experiences, and healthy diet. A good summary is available at:

www.parentingstrategies.net

A free parenting course that gathers that's based on these well-researched ideas is: www.triplep-parenting.com

—Chris Aiken, MD, updated 6/7/2025

Omega-3 for Vegetarians

Omega-3 is a healthy fat that coats brain cells and is part of what makes fish so good for the brain. Vegetarian sources include:

Nuts (especially walnuts), seeds (chia, flax), oils (canola, soybean, flax, mustard), beans (especially edamame), berries and other fruits (cantaloupe, kiwi, mango, melon, bananas, cherries, pineapple), vegetables (spinach, collards, kale, brussel sprouts, cauliflower, broccoli, squash, cabbage), wheat germ, and seaweed.