

# Prenatal Mental Health

## A Message to Expectant People

Whether this is your first baby or your fourth, creating a new life can be exciting, chaotic, and emotional at times. We encourage you to take care of yourself and remember that outside your identity as a pregnant person you have deep value and purpose. So be patient with yourself and take up as much space as you need. You've got this!



## Prenatal Brain Development and Health

The prenatal period is a very important time for the developing brain of an infant. During this time, complex brain networks and connections are being formed.<sup>1</sup> In the first eight years of life, these connections, along with a child's early life experiences, will contribute to their social, cognitive, language, and emotional development.<sup>2,3</sup>

### Prenatal Stress

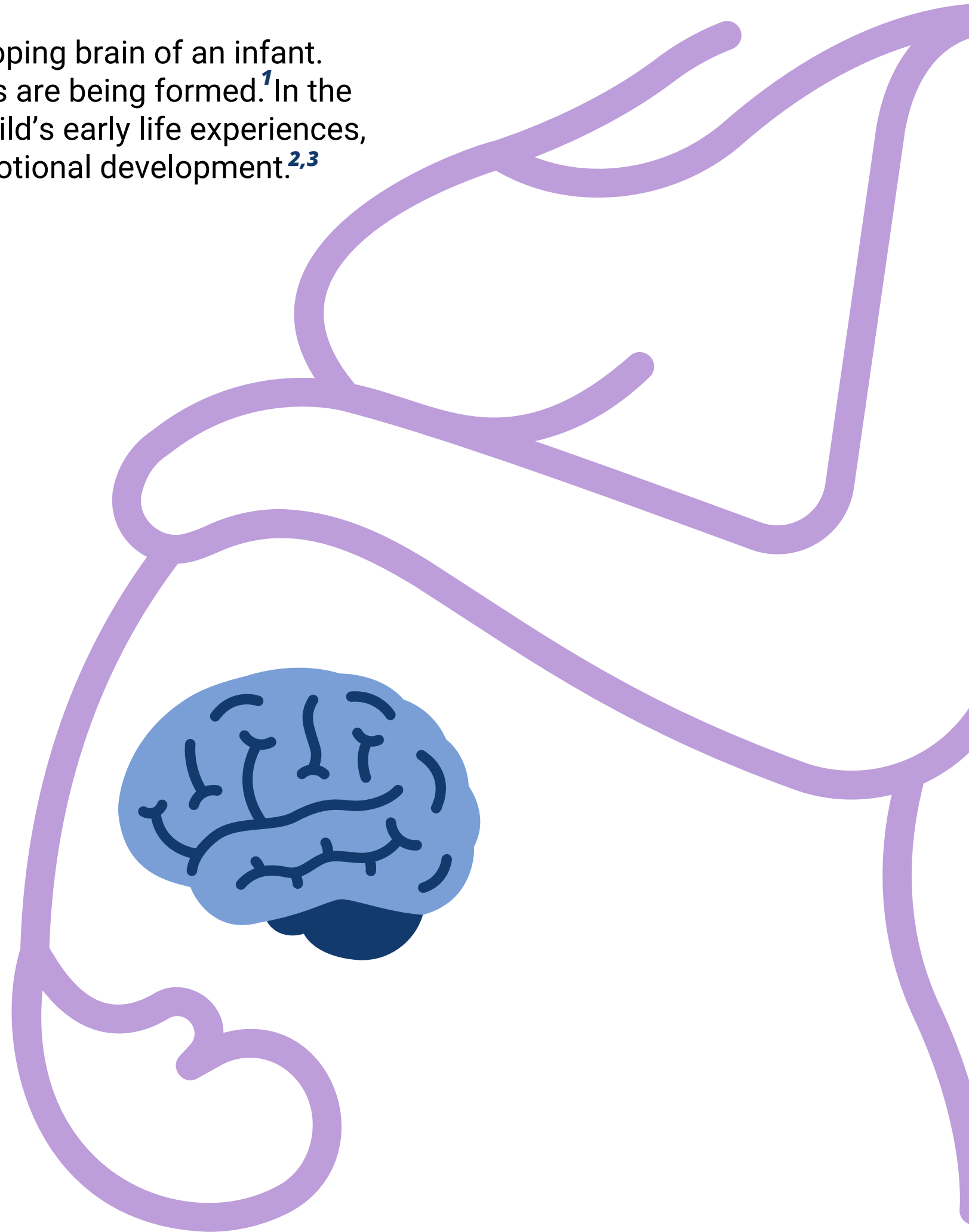
Stress is a common feeling we get when we feel under pressure, overwhelmed or unable to cope. In small amounts, stress can be positive and healthy. But too much of it, especially when it feels out of control, can negatively impact our mood, physical and mental well-being, and relationships.<sup>7,9</sup>

Research has identified that stress can alter the developing brain of infants. Below are different types of stressors to be mindful of during your pregnancy:

**Acute Stress:** short-term stress (a fight with your partner or family member, a traffic jam, miscommunication with your boss, etc.)



**Chronic Stress:** stress that lasts a long period of time (racism, trauma, homelessness, financial problems, depression, anxiety, etc.)



## Why It Matters

Mental health begins to form in our earliest days, even before birth. A baby's brain starts to grow during pregnancy and continues throughout life. The biggest contributor to a healthy baby brain is a responsive and dependable caregiver. There are so many ways you can help your baby's brain develop starting with your nutrition and taking good care of your physical and mental health and well-being through the pregnancy.<sup>8</sup>

Early brain development is foundational for the education, health, and behavior of a child.<sup>4</sup> Long-term stress during pregnancy can change connections in a fetus' brain that are responsible for managing emotions, memory, and decision-making.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, addressing pregnancy-related stressors early can help prevent developmental challenges and prepare children for success later in life.<sup>4</sup>

While managing stress is important, keep in mind that your baby can thrive even if your pregnancy doesn't go as you imagined. Once your child is born, they will be exposed to people and experiences that can positively shape their mental and physical development. It takes a community, and some trial and error, to raise healthy children, so don't put too much pressure on yourself to get it right from the start.



## Take Action

There are several things you can do to manage your health and well-being during pregnancy:

- Don't expect too much from yourself and set realistic goals. Rest when you need to.<sup>5</sup>
- Try not to make any major changes at this time.<sup>5</sup>
- Stay physically active.<sup>6</sup>
- Eat balanced meals, and drink plenty of water.<sup>7</sup>
- Prioritize getting a good night's sleep (8-10 hours). Create a soothing bedtime routine & supplement with day time naps as needed.<sup>10</sup>
- Spend time with loved ones, and those that make you feel relaxed.<sup>7</sup>
- Avoid using drugs and alcohol.<sup>7</sup>
- Join a support group with other expectant people and parents.<sup>5</sup>
- Seek professional assistance if needed. If you or your partner continue to feel overwhelmed during pregnancy or postpartum, consider working with a trained perinatal mental health therapist for emotional support & treatment.<sup>6</sup>

## Resources

- [Becoming a More Resilient Parent](#), Georgia Center for Child Advocacy.
- [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Child Development](#)
  - [Early Brain Development and Health](#)
- [Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University](#).
- [Fussy Baby Network](#)
  - Families struggling with their infants' crying, sleeping, or feeding can call free warm line 1-888-431-2229 for help in English and Spanish
- Health and Human Services: Maternal Mental Health Hotline
  - Call or text at 1-833-9-HELP4MOMS (1-833-943-5746) in English and Spanish
- [Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies Coalition of Georgia \(HMHGA\)](#).
  - [Pickles & Ice Cream Georgia](#)
- [Peace for Moms](#)
- [Postpartum Support International \(PSI\), Georgia Chapter](#)
  - [Perinatal Mental Health GA Provider Directory](#).

## References

1. [Exposures to Poverty and Crime in Pregnancy Found to Perturb Prenatal Brain Development](#)
2. [CDC Early Brain Development and Health](#)
3. [CDC Child Development Basics](#)
4. [Harvard University, Center on the Developing Child, The Science of Early Childhood](#)
5. [Australian Government Dept. of Health & Aged Care, Mental Well-being during Pregnancy](#)
6. [Pickles & Ice cream Georgia, Coping and Self-Care Skills for Mothers](#)
7. [MotherToBaby: Stress](#)
8. [Pickles & Ice Cream Georgia, How to Build A Baby Brain!](#)
9. [UNICEF, Parenting - What is Stress?](#)
10. [American Academy of Family Physicians, Sleep and Pregnancy](#).

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