

Text N°7: Fetal Origins

What makes us the way we are? Why are some people predisposed to be anxious, overweight or asthmatic? How is it that some of us are prone to heart attacks, diabetes or high blood pressure?

5 There's a list of conventional answers to these questions. We are the way we are because it's in our genes: the DNA we inherited at conception. We turn out the way we do because of our childhood experiences: how we were treated and what we took in, especially during those crucial first three years. Or our health and well-being stem from the lifestyle choices we make as adults: what kind of diet we consume, how much exercise we get.

10 But there's another powerful source of influence you may not have considered: your life as a fetus. The kind and quantity of nutrition you received in the womb; the pollutants, drugs and infections you were exposed to during gestation; your mother's health, stress level and state of mind while she was pregnant with you — all these factors shaped you as a baby and a child and continue to affect you to this day.

15 This is the provocative contention of a field known as fetal origins [or the developmental origins of health and disease], whose pioneers assert that the nine months of gestation constitute the most consequential period of our lives, permanently influencing the wiring of the brain and the functioning of organs such as the heart, liver and pancreas. The conditions we encounter in utero, they claim, shape our susceptibility to disease, our appetite and metabolism, our intelligence and temperament. In the literature on the subject, which has exploded over the past
20 10 years, you can find references to the fetal origins of cancer, cardiovascular disease, allergies, asthma, hypertension, diabetes, obesity, mental illness — even of conditions associated with old age like arthritis, osteoporosis and cognitive decline.

25 The notion of prenatal influence may conjure up frivolous attempts to enrich the fetus: playing Mozart to a pregnant belly and the like. In reality, the shaping and molding that goes on in utero is far more visceral and consequential than that. Much of what a pregnant woman encounters in her daily life — the air she breathes, the food and drink she consumes, the chemicals she's exposed to, even the emotions she feels — is shared in some fashion with her fetus. The fetus incorporates these offerings into its own body, makes them part of its flesh and blood. (...)

Annie Murphy Paul: <http://www.time.com>, Wednesday, Sep. 22nd, 2010.