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Authors: Shannon L. Gillespie, Lisa M. Christian, Angela D. Alston, Pamela Salsberry



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Childhood stress and birth timing among African American women: Cortisol as biological mediator

Shannon L. Gillespie, PhD, RN^{1*}, Lisa M. Christian, PhD², Angela D. Alston, DNP, MPH, WHNP-BC³, Pamela Salsberry, PhD, RN, FAAN⁴

¹College of Nursing, The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH, USA; gillespie.175@osu.edu

²Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Health, College of Medicine, The Ohio State University; Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, College of Medicine, The Ohio State University; Institute for Behavioral Medicine Research, Wexner Medical Center, The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH, USA; lisa.christian@osumc.edu

³OhioHealth Physician Group, Columbus, OH, USA; Angela.Alston@ohiohealth.com

⁴Department of Health Behavior and Health Promotion, College of Public Health, The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH, USA; salsberry.1@osu.edu

*Please address correspondence to Shannon L. Gillespie at 358 Newton Hall, 1585 Neil Avenue, Columbus, OH, USA; 1-614-292-4589 Office; 1-614-292-7976 Fax

Highlights

- Childhood stress shapes birth timing, independent of stress in adulthood.
- Childhood interpersonal loss, physical danger, and role disruption play important roles.
- Maternal cortisol elevation appears to be a key biological mediator.

Abstract

Preterm birth (PTB) occurs among 1:11 U.S. white women and 1:7.5 African American women and is a significant driver of racial disparities in infant mortality. Maternal stress is the most common clinical phenotype underlying spontaneous PTB. Specific patterns of stress and biological mediators driving PTB remain unclear. We examined the effect of childhood stress on birth timing among African American women and evaluated maternal cortisol elevation as a biological mediator. A prospective observational design was employed, with a single study visit at 28-32 weeks gestation and medical record review. The Stress and Adversity Inventory was administered, which provides a comprehensive estimate of childhood stress, stress in adulthood, and five core characteristic subscales (interpersonal loss, physical danger, humiliation,

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