Increases in babies born with microcephaly have followed Zika epidemics in Brazil and other countries. Through closer study, it is now clear that Zika virus is a cause of microcephaly. How it causes microcephaly remains unclear.

Zika virus infects nerve cells, especially immature neurons that divide to make neurons in the fetal brain. If these cells die or don’t divide, a baby’s brain will be smaller, resulting in microcephaly.

Data suggest that babies exposed to Zika during the first trimester of pregnancy are most at risk for microcephaly. Even so, most babies aren’t affected. It may be that genetic or immune factors reduce the risk.

Some children exposed to Zika prenatally have vision problems, hearing loss and/or joint deformities. Studies are ongoing to better understand what is now called “congenital Zika syndrome.”

No Zika vaccine is yet available. For now, the best way to avoid Zika is to avoid being bitten by mosquitoes that carry the virus. The CDC website has some helpful tips.