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Preterm Birth and Your Baby's Health

Each year, about 1 in 10 babies in the United States is born prematurely. A child who is born prematurely (before 37 weeks) is at a higher risk for developing health problems. Though some of those health conditions may be resolved with early treatment, some may become long-term, chronic illnesses or disabilities. Others, may not even show up until your child is older, even into adulthood.

If you are expecting, there are steps you can take to minimize your risk of preterm delivery. What's more, finding and treating any potential problems as early as possible during pregnancy is key to helping babies live longer, healthier lives. In addition to general information as to how preterm birth affects your baby's health, below are some ways in which you can prevent and detect preterm delivery.



Remember, your midwife, ob-gyn, or family medicine doctor knows your health and pregnancy best, so make sure to always follow up with your medical care provider on any questions or doubts you may have regarding your pregnancy.

What is preterm labor and birth?

Preterm labor, also known as premature labor, is when you start having regular contractions that cause your cervix to begin to open before you reach 37 weeks of pregnancy. Sometimes, doctors can intervene and prevent a woman from delivering before 37 weeks, such as with medications or bedrest. Other times, however, the pregnancy may pose too risky and preterm

labor is induced or a cesarean section is performed before 37 weeks. Regardless, if you deliver your baby before 37 weeks, your baby is considered premature.



Typically, the earlier your child is born, the higher the risk he or she has of developing a health problem or disability. Your child's genetic makeup, the time your child spends in the hospital, and your health are just a few of many factors that can also affect your child's risk factor. Every case is unique, and simply because your child is born prematurely doesn't necessarily mean that he or she will be disabled in the future.

How does preterm birth affect your baby's health?

- **Your baby's brain.** Premature birth can lead to intellectual and developmental delays and disabilities. If your child's brain is affected, it may also affect his or her:
 - **Physical development.** Children born prematurely tend to be of low birth weight and may be smaller than other children. This may be due to deficiencies in vitamins, hormones, and minerals that a baby's body has not yet developed.
 - **Learning.** Your child may require special therapy in the future to help with learning difficulties or disabilities.
 - **Communication, including speaking and hearing problems.** The brain is responsible for language and sound processing.
 - **Behavior.** Some preemies may be at higher risk of having attention and/or anxiety disorders, such as ADHD; others may be diagnosed on the autism spectrum.
 - **Nervous system.** The brain, spinal cord, and nerves are connected throughout the body. Some short-term problems include bleeding in the brain and fluid in the brain, while long-term problems like seizure disorders and cerebral palsy are also common.



- **Your baby's lungs.** Many preemies will experience breathing difficulties at birth due to underdeveloped lungs and an immature respiratory system.



- **Trouble breathing at birth.** It's likely that any breathing problems will be spotted at the hospital and treated right away to keep your baby alive and well. After leaving the hospital, your baby may still require some additional breathing treatments at home to help the lungs fully develop.
 - **Breathing problems in the future.** It's not uncommon for children who are born early to develop asthma, sleep apnea, and bronchopulmonary dysplasia, a disorder that causes the lungs to grow abnormally. Some breathing problems may come and go throughout your child's life, but others can become long-term illnesses.
- **Your baby's immune system.** It's common for preterm babies to have underdeveloped immune systems. This can lead to infection, some of which can be deadly. If your preemie shows signs of a cold or infection, seek medical help. Keep your home clean and limit your baby's contact with people who are sick. Breastfeeding has also been found to be beneficial in boosting a newborn's immune system.
- **Other long-term health problems**
 - **Digestive problems.** Babies born early are more likely to have immature gastrointestinal systems and, as a result, develop digestive disorders.
 - **Vision problems.** Some preemies will develop retinopathy of prematurity, a disease that occurs when the blood vessels swell and overgrow into the retina. This can impair your child's vision and even cause blindness.
 - **Hearing problems.** Before your child leaves the hospital, his or her hearing will be checked, but if you notice any hearing problems as your child grows, talk to your doctor.

- **Dental problems.** Though it may sound minor, some dental problems can lead to eating difficulties and pain, which may result in low weight and malnutrition. Infections of the mouth can spread and cause internal health problems.
- **Autoimmune disorders.** These long-term health conditions occur when a person's immune system begins to attack him or herself, causing harm to internal organs and/or joints. They include rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, and multiple sclerosis, to name a few, and can develop during childhood or adulthood.

Who is at risk of delivering a baby preterm?

- Women who smoke, abuse alcohol, or use drugs.
- Being pregnant with twins or multiples.
- Women who are younger than 17 or older than 35.
- Having anemia or low weight before and/or during pregnancy.
- Women who have had a preterm delivery in the past.
- Women who have certain health conditions or taking certain medications, or whose developing baby has been diagnosed with a disease or abnormality. If you have a health condition that puts you at high risk of giving birth early, you may be referred to a fetal and maternity medicine doctor, also known as a perinatologist.

What can you do to prevent preterm delivery?

While the above risk factors increase your chance of delivering a baby preterm, it's not to say that women who are healthy cannot give birth before 37 weeks. Here are some steps you can take to help you deliver full term.

1. **Take care of yourself.** Eat well, get plenty of rest, start prenatal care early, stop unhealthy habits (like smoking), manage your stress, and see your healthcare provider regularly.

2. **Learn the symptoms of preterm labor.** If you are having any one of these symptoms before 37 weeks, call your midwife or doctor right away.

- More vaginal discharge than usual, or a change in the type of discharge (color and/or consistency)
- Any vaginal bleeding or spotting
- Low back pain, especially if it's dull or you haven't had back pain in the past
- Increased pressure in the pelvic area (a feeling that your baby is pushing down)
- Menstrual-like cramping or abdominal pain
- More than 4 contractions in 1 hour



When to seek help if you think your child may have a health or developmental problem.

Nobody knows your child better than you do. If you feel or notice that something is odd about the way in which your child plays, moves, learns, speaks, or acts, consult with your child's pediatrician or family medicine doctor. Don't wait to seek help, as early treatment often leads to better results.



How do you know if your child's development is on the right track? Though every child is different and develops at a different pace, there are some key milestones that can help you gauge where your child is at. [Here is a milestone checklist](#) you can use to share with your child's medical care provider at your next visit.

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