

Editorial Note on Preterm Infant

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EDITORIAL

A premature baby is one who is born too early, before 37 weeks of pregnancy. Each year, about 1 in 10 babies in the United States is born prematurely. Premature babies may not be fully developed at birth. They may have more health problems and may need to stay in the hospital longer than babies born later. Thanks to advances in medical care, even babies born very prematurely are more likely to survive today than ever before.

Causes

At birth, a baby is classified as one of the following:

- Premature (less than 37 weeks gestation)
- Full term (37 to 42 weeks gestation)
- Post term (born after 42 weeks gestation)

If a woman goes into labor before 37 weeks, it is called preterm labor.

Late preterm babies who are born between 35 and 37 weeks gestation may not look premature. They may not be admitted to a neonatal intensive care unit (NICU), but they are still at risk for more problems than full-term babies.

Health conditions in the mother, such as diabetes, heart disease, and kidney disease, may contribute to preterm labor. Often, the cause of preterm labor is unknown. Some premature births are multiple pregnancies, such as twins or triplets.

Different pregnancy-related problems increase the risk of preterm labor or early delivery:

- A weakened cervix that begins to open (dilate) early, also called cervical incompetence
- Birth defects of the uterus
- History of preterm delivery
- Infection (a urinary tract infection or infection of the amniotic membrane)
- Poor nutrition right before or during pregnancy
- Preeclampsia: High blood pressure and protein in the urine that develop after the 20th week of pregnancy

- Premature rupture of the membranes (placenta previa)

Other factors that increase the risk for preterm labor and a premature delivery include:

- Age of the mother (mothers who are younger than 16 or older than 35)
- Being African American
- Lack of prenatal care
- Low socioeconomic status
- Use of tobacco, cocaine, or amphetamines

Breathing problems: These include:

Apnea of prematurity (also called AOP): This is a pause in breathing for 15 to 20 seconds or more. It may happen together with a slow heart rate called bradycardia.

Bronchopulmonary dysplasia (also called BPD): This is a lung disease that can develop in premature babies as well as babies who have treatment with a breathing machine. Babies with BPD have a higher risk of lung infections than other babies and BPD sometimes leads to lung damage.

Respiratory distress syndrome (also called RDS): If a baby has RDS, her lungs can't make enough of a substance called surfactant. Surfactant is a slippery substance that keeps small air sacs in a baby's lungs from collapsing.

Infections or neonatal sepsis: Premature babies can get infections more easily than other babies because their immune systems aren't fully developed. The immune system protects your body from infection. Infection in premature babies can lead to sepsis, when the body has an extreme response to infection. Sepsis can be life-threatening.

Intraventricular hemorrhage (also called IVH): This is bleeding in the fluid-filled spaces (also called ventricles) in the brain. The more premature a baby is, the more likely he is to have IVH.

Retinopathy of prematurity (also called ROP): This is an eye disease that happens when a baby's retina's don't fully develop in the weeks after birth. The retina is the nerve tissue that lines the back of the eye. ROP usually affects both eyes. Most babies with ROP have a mild case and don't need treatment. But babies with severe ROP can have vision problems or blindness.

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