Facts about Preterm Birth

Preterm Birth:
• A birth that occurs before 37 completed weeks of pregnancy
• A full-term pregnancy lasts about 40 weeks, more than nine months

Early Term Birth:
• A birth at 37 and 38 weeks
• Babies born by scheduled induction or cesarean at 37 and 38 weeks may not be ready and are more likely to have problems after birth. These may include:
  • Breathing problems
  • Feeding difficulties
  • Trouble staying warm
  • Low blood sugar
• Babies with these problems may need to be cared for in a special nursery and can be separated from their moms and families.

If you decide to schedule your baby’s birth, unless there is a medical reason to deliver early, wait until you are at least 39 weeks.

Who is at risk for preterm birth?
Three groups of women have the highest risk for preterm birth:
• Women who have had a preterm baby before
• Women who are pregnant with twins, triplets or more
• Women with some abnormalities of the uterus or cervix

Some medical conditions may increase the risk for preterm birth:
• High blood pressure
• Infections
• Diabetes
• Short time between pregnancies
• Obesity
The way you live may increase your risk for preterm birth:
• Smoking
• Drinking alcohol
• Using illegal drugs
• Taking some medicines
• Not seeing a doctor during pregnancy
• Domestic violence
• Lack of community and family support
• High stress
• Long working hours or long periods of standing

What medical complications are more common in premature babies, those babies born before 37 weeks?
• Babies born too soon may have problems with breathing, bleeding in the brain, heart problems, stomach problems and other problems.
• Premature babies have not finished developing when they are born. This is true for inside and outside of their bodies.
• The last few weeks of pregnancy are very important for brain development.
• Babies born too soon may have more learning and behavior problems than babies born at 40 weeks.
• Premature babies are more likely to have cerebral palsy, mental retardation, and seeing and hearing problems than babies born at 40 weeks.

What are the costs of U.S. preterm births?
• The cost for a preterm baby is almost 11 times as high as the cost for a healthy full-term baby.
• Costs to employers when a woman gives birth to a preterm baby can be almost double that for a mother who gives birth to a healthy full-term baby.
• With a preterm baby, the family’s emotional cost, hospital and healthcare costs can be high.

What can be done to prevent preterm births?
Some causes of preterm birth cannot be changed, but women who are healthy during pregnancy are more likely to have a healthy baby. A woman can:
• Plan pregnancies, be healthy and see a doctor before she gets pregnant
• See a doctor or nurse before 10-12 weeks and keep all appointments
• Stop smoking, drinking alcohol and taking illegal drugs; stay away when others are smoking
• Take vitamins
• Eat healthy - lots of fruits and vegetables. Avoid too much sugar and fat
• Keep a healthy weight before and during pregnancy
• Know the signs of preterm labor
• If you schedule your baby’s birth, wait until you are at least 39 weeks unless there is a medical reason to deliver early


Every Day Makes A Difference In Your Baby’s Development

To find out more about preterm birth:
• For facts on prematurity, visit www.marchofdimes.com/mission/prematurity.html

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Preparing for a Lifetime, It’s Everyone’s Responsibility
http://iio.health.ok.gov
Maternal and Child Health Service - Oklahoma State Department of Health
1000 Northeast Tenth Street, Oklahoma City, OK 73117-1299
Phone 405-271-4480 Fax 405-271-2944

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