

Premature birth is a broad term for when babies are born before 37 weeks. The risks to baby and mom decrease with every week closer to the due date. In the United States, about 10% of all live births happen before 37 weeks. With multiples, pre-term birth is much more likely. In developed countries, like the U.S., even babies born at 23-24 weeks have a 50% chance of survival.

Pre-Term Labor:

You can lower your risk for pre-term labor during pregnancy by eating healthy food, getting some exercise, taking prenatal vitamins, going to your prenatal checkups, and minimizing stress when possible.

No amount of drug use, smoking, or vaping is safe for your baby!

In some cases, your provider may induce labor early for your or your baby's health and safety.

If you experience signs of labor, contact your provider or go to the hospital immediately.

Signs of labor are leaking fluid or blood, contractions, cramps, pain in the lower back, and/or heaviness or pressure in your pelvic area.

If pre-term labor starts, your provider will make a decision on whether to try to slow or stop labor or deliver the baby based on how many weeks along you are and, if known, the reason why your labor started early. Most of the time, labor can be delayed to give your baby more time to develop in the womb.

Understanding Your Preemie:

Every baby is unique, and the outcomes of pre-term birth will vary based on your own baby's development inside the womb. Almost all babies born with low birth weight – very common for preemies – will need specialized care in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU).

Preemies often have issues regulating their body temperature and they lack body fat, so they will often be placed in an incubator to help keep them warm. Because their immune system is often underdeveloped as well, be sure to disinfect baby's items and wash your hands frequently to prevent infection.

Research shows that preemies who have adequate postnatal (after birth) growth are less likely to experience long-term effects. Breastmilk contains a unique mix of nutrients and other factors to promote development and protect against infections, which allows for optimal growth! If possible, breastfeed or pump for your preemie baby, and ask about donor milk if you have any difficulties.

Caring for Your Preemie Baby:

Having a premature baby can be a stressful experience. Your baby may be hooked up to cords and monitors in the NICU. You may not be able to hold, cuddle, or kiss your baby the way you imagined. All of these things can make you feel less of a bond with your baby. It's okay share these feelings with your provider and other trusted support people like family and friends.

Also, be aware of your own physical health and well-being. When you are well-rested and taking care of yourself physically and emotionally, you will be better able to care for your baby! Prioritize your own health checkups too.

If your baby is in the NICU, you might feel anxious and even a little powerless. Remind yourself that they are well-cared for, and be involved! If your baby is able, hold them skin-to-skin as soon and as often as you can. Talk and sing to them. Breastfeed if possible, and if not, pump your milk for baby's feedings. You may be discharged before your baby, and it's okay to allow yourself some time at home to rest too!

Here are a few things to keep in mind as you care for your preemie at home:

- Attend regular checkups for baby, and follow up with specialists if needed
- Prioritize feeding and sleeping – these are the best things for their growth!
- Limit outings and visitors until baby's immune system is more developed. When visitors come, be sure hands are washed before anyone touches your baby.

As with any new baby, if you feel any thoughts of harming yourself or baby, or have overwhelming anxiety or negative emotions, you can text or call the National Maternal Mental Health hotline at 1-800-TLC-MAMA – it's free, confidential, and available 24/7. Also, talk to your provider as soon as you can.

References:

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