

## REDUCING THE RISK OF PRETERM BIRTH



Figure 1. The goal of every pregnancy is a full-term baby. Photo courtesy of the March of Dimes.



Figure 2. Premature babies can have problems if born too early or too small. Photo courtesy of the March of Dimes.



Figure 3. Reduce your risk for preterm birth by stopping smoking. Photo courtesy of the March of Dimes.

Mothers who have had one preterm infant are at a higher risk for another premature birth in the future. The information in this teaching tool is essential to helping to achieve the goal of every pregnancy, that is, a full-term baby.

A full-term pregnancy lasts between 37 and 42 weeks. Babies born before 37 weeks are premature and often have special problems. Babies born too soon often:

- Need special care in the neonatal intensive care unit of the hospital (NICU)
- Have trouble breathing, feeding, and keeping warm
- Have or are more likely to develop infections
- Stay in the hospital for days or weeks after their mother goes home

Some infants may not be mature enough or strong enough to live. Others have ongoing problems like difficulty breathing, problems growing, blindness, difficulty walking, or problems learning that continue long after they leave the hospital.

### What can I do to prevent another premature birth?

Although preterm birth is difficult to prevent, there are some things you can do to reduce your risk. Talk with your healthcare provider to understand why your baby was born prematurely. Often no specific cause is found. If a cause is found, treatment may be available. Understand that the risk for prematurity is higher if you have had the following:

- Previous preterm birth
- Problems with your cervix
- Problems with your uterus
- Exposure to a medicine, DES, that your mother may have taken while she was pregnant with you
- Multiple gestations (twins, triplets, etc.)
- Bladder or kidney infections
- Pregnancy in the last year
- Problems with your teeth or gums

### Do other health problems contribute to prematurity?

Many women have hidden health problems that can affect their baby. It is important to be evaluated for Diabetes mellitus, high blood pressure, anemia, and other chronic diseases before your next pregnancy.

Some chemicals can be toxic to you and may affect the development of your baby. The most common harmful substances are alcohol and tobacco smoke. Talk to your health care provider about whether you might be exposed to any other harmful chemicals at work or in your home.

### What can I do before my next pregnancy to reduce the risk for premature birth?

Find a good health care provider, and see them before you get pregnant. If you have had a prior premature birth, you may benefit from an evaluation by, or in some cases ongoing care from, a special doctor, often called a maternal-fetal medicine specialist, or perinatologist.

- Use birth control so your pregnancies are *at least* 1 year apart.
- Gain weight if you are underweight; lose weight if you are overweight.
- Take a multivitamin and folic acid every day, even when you are not pregnant, to prevent birth defects that happen even before you miss your first period.
- Eat a healthy diet.
- Stop smoking and avoid smoke from others as well.
- No safe dose of alcohol has been determined; it is best to avoid any alcohol intake.
- Ask your health care provider or pharmacist if any of the prescribed or over the counter medicines or diet supplements that you take are safe for use during pregnancy.
- Eliminate any other drugs or substances such as cocaine, heroin, or PCP.
- Visit your health care provider to make sure you are healthy and do not have any infections.
- See a dentist.
- Reduce stress.

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Figure 4. Take vitamins and eat healthy during your pregnancy.  
Photo courtesy of the March of Dimes.



Figure 5. Be alert for signs of preterm labor. Sometimes preterm labor is not painful.  
Photo courtesy of the March of Dimes.



Figure 6. Go immediately to the hospital if you suspect preterm labor.  
Photo courtesy of the March of Dimes.

### What can I do if I am already pregnant?

- Start prenatal care early – make an appointment the moment you suspect you might be pregnant
- Continue to take your multivitamins and folic acid
- Eat a balanced diet
- Do not smoke or drink alcohol
- Stay alert for signs of preterm labor

### How will I know if I am having signs of preterm labor?

Preterm labor may act differently than regular labor. Seek care immediately if you have any one of the following symptoms:

- Menstrual-like cramps
- Low dull or constant backache
- Pelvic pressure, or feeling heavy “down below”
- Changes in color, amount, or thickness of vaginal discharge
- Bleeding from the vagina
- Cramping with or without diarrhea
- Increased frequency of urination
- Painful or painless uterine contractions, tightening of your belly, or “balling up”
- Sudden gush or constant slow leak of fluid from the vagina

### What should I do if I think I might have preterm labor?

- React immediately—don’t wait.
- Contact your healthcare provider.
- Tell the healthcare provider what you are feeling even if you are unsure, or think the symptoms may not be important.
- If you cannot reach your healthcare provider, go directly to the hospital.
- Ask someone to take you to the hospital or call the police or an ambulance for help.

### Where can I learn more about prematurity?

There are a many helpful books and websites on this topic.

#### Books

- *The Pregnancy Bed Rest Book*. Amy E. Tracy. Berkley; 2001.
- *Pregnancy After a Loss*. Carol Cirulli Hanham. Berkley; 1999.
- *Every Pregnant Woman’s Guide to Preventing Premature Birth*. Barbara Luke. Author’s Choice Press; 2002.
- *A Guide to Effective Care in Pregnancy and Childbirth*. Enkin M, Keirse M, Neilson J, Crowther C, Duley L, et al. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Oxford University Press; 2000.

#### Useful Web Sites

- General pregnancy and preventing prematurity

[www.modimes.org](http://www.modimes.org)

This excellent site provides a variety of information on pregnancy in general. Specific information on preterm birth, premature infants, smoking cessation, and pregnancy loss is written for lay readers and professionals. Available in English and Spanish.

- Premature rupture of membranes (PROM)

[www.kanalen.org/prom](http://www.kanalen.org/prom)

Provides a discussion of PROM highlighting treatment options, medical literature, personal stories, and frequently asked questions, and other high-risk pregnancy resources.

- Incompetent cervix

[www.geocities.com/incompetentcervix/](http://www.geocities.com/incompetentcervix/)

Site focuses on information and support connecting women around the world who have cervical challenges.

- Bed rest during pregnancy

[www.fpb.cwru.edu/bedrest/](http://www.fpb.cwru.edu/bedrest/)

[www.Sidelines.org](http://www.Sidelines.org)

Provides nationwide support for women and families living through a high-risk pregnancy. Frequently asked questions, a reading list, physician referrals, highlights of new treatments and the latest research and developments are provided.

- Multiple Gestation

National Organization of Mothers of Twins

[www.nomotc.org](http://www.nomotc.org)

Non-profit network of over 23,000 parents of multiples. Site contains information and resources to promote the development and parenting of children who are multiples.