

PREMATURITY AWARENESS

What is prematurity?

A premature or preterm baby is a baby born before 37 completed weeks of pregnancy. An average pregnancy is 40 weeks, so a premature baby is born at least 3 weeks early. Prematurity is a serious health problem for Maryland and for the nation. Babies born too soon can have lifelong or life-threatening health problems. Premature babies are often also low birthweight (weighing less than 5 ½ pounds). In Maryland, prematurity and low birthweight are the leading cause of infant deaths (deaths in the first year of life).

Many premature babies spend weeks or even months in a neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) after birth. While many premature babies grow up healthy, others have lifelong disabilities. These can include cerebral palsy, mental retardation, learning problems, chronic breathing problems, vision and hearing loss. Half of all nervous system disabilities in children are related to premature birth.

How big a problem is prematurity?

The number of babies born prematurely has increased steadily in the United States, and in Maryland, for the past several decades. In Maryland, the increase has been slower than in the nation as a whole.

In 2005, 12.7% of all births in the United States were premature. That means that one out of every 8 babies is born too early. There are over 4 million births each year in the U.S. Half a million of these babies are born prematurely.

In Maryland in 2005, the rate of prematurity was slightly higher than the national average, with 13.3% of all babies born prematurely. Almost 10,000 babies are born prematurely in Maryland every year.

Does it matter if my baby is born only a few weeks early?

Absolutely. Even a baby born just a few weeks early faces greater risks than a full term baby. Babies born between 34 and 36 weeks are called late preterm babies. Late preterm babies have more medical problems than full term babies. These problems can include breathing problems, low blood sugar, jaundice, feeding problems, and difficulty maintaining their temperature. Late preterm babies usually have to stay in the hospital longer at birth and are more likely to be readmitted to the hospital than term babies. A late preterm baby is 3 times as likely to die in first year of life as a full term infant.

The increase in premature births in Maryland and in the U.S. is mostly due to an increase in the number of late preterm babies. Late preterm babies account for over 70% of all babies born prematurely.

There are many reasons for the increase in late preterm babies. But one that is avoidable is early delivery, either by cesarean section or induction of labor, without a medical reason. It may seem convenient to deliver early, but it puts your baby at risk. There are cases in which either the mother or the baby has a medical problem that makes it necessary to deliver the baby early. But if there is no medical reason, talk with your doctor or midwife about waiting until 39 weeks to deliver your baby.

Why do some women deliver too soon?

There are many factors that increase the chance of a baby being born prematurely.

Race and ethnicity: A Black baby is 1 ½ times more likely to be premature than a white baby, both in the U.S. and in Maryland. The premature birth rate in Maryland is highest for Black infants (17.1%), followed by Hispanic infants (12.5%), and then white infants (11.3%). The national premature birth rates for both Black (18.1%) and white (11.5%) infants are higher than those in Maryland.



Mother's age: The chance of having a premature baby is greatest for the youngest and the oldest mothers. In Maryland, premature birth rate is highest for women 40 and older, followed by teens under age 20.

Multiple births: When a woman is carrying two or more babies, the chance of delivering prematurely is increased. About 10% of single babies are born prematurely, compared to 60% of twins and over 90% of triplets. The number of multiple births has increased dramatically in the past 2 decades with the increased use of medical treatments for infertility.

Previous premature baby: A woman who has had a premature baby is more likely to have another.

Are there risk factors for prematurity that can be treated or avoided?

There are several other risk factors that can be treated or avoided to reduce the chance of having a premature baby.

Infections: including urinary tract infections, vaginal and sexually transmitted infections, infections of the membranes around the baby, and even tooth or gum disease.

Other medical problems: such as high blood pressure, diabetes, or clotting problems; also being underweight or obese.

Smoking, drinking alcohol and using illegal drugs

Stress: such as social, financial or health problems; domestic violence, including physical, sexual or emotional abuse.



What can I do to reduce my chance of having a premature baby?

It is very difficult to predict which woman will deliver prematurely. If you have any of the risk factors listed above, **get help or treatment early**, before you become pregnant if possible.

Take a multivitamin every day that contains 400 mcg of folic acid. Start before you are pregnant. This is important for your health, whether you are pregnant or not, and it is very important for your baby's development from the very first weeks.

Plan your pregnancies and allow time between pregnancies. The risk of having a premature birth increases if there are only 6 to 9 months between the delivery of one baby and the beginning of the next pregnancy.

Try to reduce stress. Seek help and support from family and friends.

When you become pregnant, **start prenatal care early and keep all your appointments.** Prenatal care is very important for many reasons. It is a time to address chronic health problems that could affect your pregnancy. Your doctor or midwife will also follow the progress of your pregnancy, and watch for any complications.

If you are pregnant, **know the warning signs of premature labor.** If you have had a previous premature baby, are pregnant with twins or more, or have certain cervical or uterine abnormalities, you are at the greatest risk. It is especially important for you to know the signs and symptoms of premature labor and what to do if they occur.



What are the signs and symptoms of premature labor?

Premature or preterm labor is labor that starts before 37 weeks of pregnancy. There are treatments and medications that can sometimes stop or at least delay premature labor. Even if labor can not be stopped, treatment may allow enough time to transport the mother to a hospital with a neonatal intensive care unit (NICU). The mother may also be given medications that can help her baby's health, even if the baby is born early. These medications may be less effective if you wait to get help. It is very important that you seek help as soon as you think you are having premature labor.

Warning signs of premature labor:

- Contractions (your abdomen tightens like a fist) every 10 minutes or more often
- Change in vaginal discharge (leaking fluid or bleeding from your vagina)
- Pelvic pressure, a feeling that your baby is pushing down
- A dull, low backache
- Cramps that feel like your period
- Abdominal cramps with or without diarrhea

If you think you're having preterm labor, or if you have any of the warning signs, call your health care provider or go to the hospital right away.

EVERY BABY DESERVES TO BE FULL TERM AND HEALTHY!

