

Special Birth Issues

Preterm Labour

A baby is “preterm” if they’re born before 37 weeks of pregnancy. Preterm babies are more likely to have longer hospital stays and may have problems with:

- breathing
- maintaining body temperature
- sucking and swallowing
- low blood sugar
- infection
- bruising and bleeding
- jaundice (yellowish skin)

Babies born too soon are also more likely than full-term babies to have lifelong problems related to vision, breathing, walking and learning.



FAMILY STORY

Our daughter was born at 34 weeks by caesarean section. My wife had really high blood pressure and the baby was being stressed. She was born very small but – thankfully – healthy. But it was one of the most frightening things we’ve ever gone through.

Reducing your risk

Preterm labour can happen to anyone. The cause is often unknown. But your chances of preterm labour are higher if you’ve already had a preterm baby or you’re carrying twins or triplets. If you have a bladder or kidney infection or a medical condition like high blood pressure or diabetes, your risk is also increased.

You can decrease your risk of having a preterm labour by:

- seeing your health care provider regularly
- eating well
- working with your health care provider to stop or reduce smoking, drinking and drug use
- seeking help if you are experiencing domestic violence or intimate partner violence (see [Lifestyle](#))
- limiting your workday to 8 hours and finding time to rest
- exploring ways to reduce your stress
- wearing your seat belt with one strap above and one strap below your baby (if only a lap belt is available, fasten it below baby)
- getting treatment for any pelvic or urinary tract infections during pregnancy



SEEK CARE

Contact your health care provider or go to the hospital right away if you have these signs of preterm labour:

- a trickle or gush of fluid or bleeding from your vagina
- stomach pains or bad cramps that won’t go away
- unusual lower back pain or pressure
- contractions that don’t go away when you walk, rest or take a warm shower
- a feeling that something isn’t right



Preterm and Low Birth Weight Babies

What is a preterm baby (“preemie”)?

A baby born before 37 weeks.

What is a low birth weight baby?

A baby whose birth weight is in the lowest 10% of babies overall – usually less than 2½ kg (5½ lb).

The earlier your baby is born, the less they’ll weigh and the more health problems they may have. And although one-third of low birth weight babies are born at full term, they often have some of the same issues as preterm babies.



DID YOU KNOW?

Babies who have lots of physical contact with a caregiver grow faster than babies who don’t. All babies – even when they’re in an incubator – need to be touched, stroked and talked to as much as possible.



DANGER

Preterm and low birth weight babies are at higher risk for sleep-related death (see [Sleep](#)). Talk with your health care provider about how to make your baby’s sleep as safe as possible.

What is kangaroo care?

Holding your baby skin-to-skin on your chest so they can hear your heartbeat, feel you breathing and breastfeed or chestfeed.

What to expect

- Your baby may need to go to the hospital’s special care nursery (the “NICU”) after they’re born. As soon as you can, hold them skin-to-skin (“kangaroo care”). To learn more: perinatalservicesbc.ca/health-info/newborn-care
- Small babies may not be ready to feed right away, but with time and support, they will. In the meantime, hand express or pump your milk often and early – within the first hour, if possible – to start your milk supply and collect your colostrum (see [Expressing Your Milk](#)).
- Your baby may need a car seat made for babies under 2½ kg (5½ lbs). In a regular infant seat, their chin may drop down, blocking their breathing.



DID YOU KNOW?

The use of nicotine such as smoking/vaping) and/or cannabis can significantly increase the risk of low birth weight and premature birth.



DID YOU KNOW?

Your milk is perfectly suited to your preterm baby’s needs, with protein for brain growth and antibodies to protect them from infection.

Twins, Triplets and More

What to expect

- Your babies may be delivered vaginally or by caesarean, depending on their position, how many weeks they are and their health.
- Breastfeeding or chestfeeding early and often and trying different positions will help you produce enough milk (see [Breastfeeding or Chestfeeding Your Baby](#)).
- Don’t hesitate to ask for help once you’re home.



FAMILY STORY

At first, I was scared to touch my son. He was so tiny and connected to so many tubes. I learned to ask questions and focus on every improvement, no matter how small.



WHAT YOU CAN DO

If your baby is taken away for special care after birth, go with them to the nursery and take part in their care. The nurse can show you how to change their diaper, hold them skin-to-skin and help them settle.