

# What You Should Know About Preterm Labor

**E**very pregnant woman is waiting for the birth of her child. But what happens when the baby starts to come too soon? If you begin to feel labor pains before 37 weeks of pregnancy, you may be experiencing preterm labor.

## How exact is my due date?

The average pregnancy lasts 40 weeks from the first day of a woman's last menstrual period. Your due date is estimated based on this average. However, about 95% of babies are not born on their specific due dates.

## When should my baby be delivered?

A baby born between 37 and 40 weeks of pregnancy is considered "full term." Birth between 20 and 37 weeks is considered "preterm."

## What are the signs of preterm labor?

If you experience any of the following signs of labor, contact your health care professional: regular contractions that become stronger with shortening intervals; lower back pain or menstrual-like cramping that doesn't get better; mucous, watery, or bloody vaginal discharge; or stomach cramps, with or without diarrhea. If you feel pressure or swelling in your vagina, or a feeling that something is "not right," call your clinician for advice, even if you are unsure.

## What causes preterm delivery?

Sometimes preterm birth is caused by engaging in unhealthy activities during pregnancy, such as smoking, drinking alcohol, or not eating the right foods. Stress or lack of prenatal care might cause preterm labor. Infections, hormone imbalance, structural abnormality of the uterus, and chronic illness may also lead to preterm delivery. Often, the cause is unknown.

## Am I at risk for a preterm delivery?

A woman who has already had a preterm delivery has a greater risk of having another preterm birth in future pregnancies. Pregnant women who are older than 35, or younger than 19, are at higher risk for preterm labor. Being pregnant with more than one baby also increases the risk for preterm birth.

## Can I prevent preterm delivery?

During pregnancy, it is important that you make lifestyle choices to improve your well-being. Taking good care of yourself, including eating right and



getting regular periods of rest, may help reduce the possibility of going into labor too soon. If you recognize signs of preterm labor and the symptoms do not improve with resting, contact your clinician or go to the hospital immediately.

## What are the risks for babies who are born preterm?

Premature infants may face many health challenges and may need to stay in the hospital longer than other babies. Babies born before 37 weeks of pregnancy may have low birth weight or difficulty breathing. Their organs may not have had enough time to fully develop before birth. Other potential problems include infections, cerebral palsy, impaired vision, learning disabilities, and long-term conditions such as heart disease and diabetes.

Remember to contact your health care professional if you are having labor symptoms before your 37th week; a hormone or a drug may be prescribed to try to stop preterm labor if it begins.