

## **Preventable Risks of Preterm Delivery**

### **What is preterm delivery?**

A full-term pregnancy is one that lasts at least 37 weeks. Preterm delivery is when the baby is born too early. Preterm delivery is a delivery that occurs between 20 weeks and 37 weeks of pregnancy. Weeks are counted from the first day of a woman's last menstrual period.

The perinatal period is defined as the period from 20 weeks of pregnancy to 28 days after birth. It has been estimated that preterm birth accounts for over 85% of all perinatal death and disability.

Preterm delivery is a concern because babies who are born too early may not be fully developed, which can lead to a lifetime of problems and even a higher risk of death. In the United States, preterm birth is the leading cause of pediatric neurodevelopmental disability, including cerebral palsy and mental disability.

**“Preterm delivery” is sometimes called “premature delivery”,  
“premature birth”, or “preterm birth”.**

### **Facts about Preterm Birth**

- One out of every nine babies born in the United States is a preterm birth. This increases rates of infant deaths and lifelong problems for premature babies.
- About \$13.6 billion is spent each year on premature births, about half of all birth-related expenses.
- Babies born before 34 weeks are at greatest risk, but babies born between 34 and 37 weeks are also at risk.

The following seven factors may lead to an increased risk for babies to be born prematurely:

- Alcohol and drug use
- Smoking tobacco
- Weighing too much or too little
- Medical conditions such as diabetes and high blood pressure
- Stress, sadness and worry
- Abortion
- Having babies too close together

It is important that women who might become pregnant become familiar with these possible risks for preterm birth because women have the potential to influence these possible risk factors.

**It is important to be in good physical and mental health and to visit  
a doctor prior to becoming pregnant.**

## **Why is it important to learn about the preventable risk factors for preterm delivery?**

Preterm birth is currently the most important problem in maternal and child health in the United States and possibly throughout the world. It complicates approximately one in nine US deliveries, and accounts for a high percentage of infant deaths and major problems. The March of Dimes estimated that charges for hospital stays of infants with any diagnosis of prematurity were approximately \$13.6 billion, or about 50% of all birth-related spending.

The risk of health problems is greatest for babies born before 34 weeks of pregnancy, but babies born between 34 weeks and 37 weeks are also at risk.

### ***For additional information, please see:***

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*In studies of preventable risks of preterm delivery, it is much easier to determine an association between a risk factor and an outcome than to prove that the risk factor actually causes the outcome.*