

Preterm Baby

Local and global statistics on preterm births:

Globally:

15 million babies are born prematurely every year (before the 37th week).

Locally:

According to the WHO, one in every 100 births were premature in 2010 (6% of births).

Introduction:

A preterm baby is a baby born before the 37th week of pregnancy (three weeks before the birth date). A preterm birth may be accompanied by medical problems and the baby may need special care and to stay in the neonatal care unit. Newborn babies born between the 25th and 29th weeks of pregnancy may also be fed through a vein or through a tube.

Preterm births are several types:

- Babies born between the 32nd and 37th weeks of pregnancy
- Babies born between the 28th and 32nd weeks of pregnancy
- Babies born at least at the 25th week of pregnancy

Causes:

The causes of a preterm birth are often unclear but there are some common risk factors that may cause it.

Risk factors:

- A previous preterm birth
- Multiple pregnancy
- Having less than six months between one pregnancy and the other
- Pregnancy through IVF
- Some chronic conditions (e.g. high blood pressure, diabetes)
- Problems in the uterus, cervix, or placenta
- Several previous incidents of spontaneous abortion or induced abortion
- Smoking or using drugs
- Weight loss or gain before pregnancy
- Psychological stress
- Infections
- Physical trauma

Symptoms:

- The body is small and disproportionate to the head
- Thin and see through skin
- Fine hair covering much of the body
- Low body temperature, especially immediately after birth, caused by low fat supplies in the body
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing

Short and long term health issues:

- Respiratory issues
- Cardiac issues
- Digestive tract issues
- Jaundice
- Anemia
- Infections
- Issues with growth and movement
- Dental problems

- Problems with vision or hearing
- Cerebral palsy
- Learning difficulties
- Behavioral or psychological problems
- Chronic health issues (e.g. asthma)

Prevention:

Preterm births cannot be prevented for unclear reasons. However, the following is recommended:

- Respect hospital appointments during your pregnancy to check both mother and baby are healthy.
- Limit preterm birth risk factors (e.g. smoking, using drugs, etc.).
- Avoid heavy lifting or standing for long periods of time as they may increase the risk of preterm birth.

Caring for a preterm baby after leaving the hospital:

- Make sure to breastfeed your baby.
- Make sure the baby remains in an appropriate temperature.
- Help the baby sleep in a calm and dim room.
- Do not sleep next to the baby but rather place the infant in its own bed.
- Avoid direct sunlight.
- Pay attention to the baby's hygiene.
- Avoid using any type of moisturizer without first consulting with a doctor.
- Ask a doctor for advice when needed.

Problems mothers of preterm babies face:

During this time, parents should be offered support and encouragement. Visit the baby and stay with him/her as much as possible. You may not be able to carry the baby for his/her own safety. Preterm babies may face problems that could lead to death as they are at an increased risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome.

Recommendations from the American Academy of Pediatrics to limit the risk of death for infants from zero to 1 years old:

- Infants should receive all recommended vaccinations.
- Breastfeeding is recommended for at least six months.
- Always place your baby on his or her back for every sleep time. If the infant is awake, you can allow him/her to sleep on the stomach (tummy time) to strengthen stomach muscles and reduce flat headedness on the condition that the infant's parents or adults are supervising.
- Use a firm mattress (covered by a tightly fitted sheet) to prevent gaps between the mattress and the sides of the crib.
- The baby should not sleep in the same bed as the parents.
- Avoid excessively covering the baby with clothes or covering its face and head.
- Make sure the baby's crib is placed in a risk free area (e.g. not containing any wires).

FAQ:

○ **When can a preterm baby leave the hospital?**

The baby will be ready to leave the hospital when he/she can breathe without support and can be breastfed or fed through a bottle. The baby's weight gain should also be stable.

Clinical Health Education Department

For more information, please contact us by email on:

Hpromotion@moh.gov.sa