

Reducing Premature Births: Giving All Babies a Healthy Start in Life

Few sights engender more awe than a newly-delivered baby. Delicate and dependent, yet full of promise, a baby is truly a miracle. However, for babies that are born prematurely, their start in life may be much more difficult. In the US today, approximately 1 in 8 babies are born too early. (1)

Premature birth occurs when the baby is delivered earlier than 37 weeks completed gestation. The combination of prematurity and low birth weight is the leading cause of infant mortality, the death of a child before their first birthday, in North Carolina. Low birth weight is defined as 5.5 pounds or less. In addition to physical and developmental problems, costs for premature babies are 15 times higher on average (\$41,610) than for full term deliveries (\$2,830). (2)

Contributing factors that may lead to a premature birth include chromosomal abnormalities, high blood pressure, preeclampsia, a short cervix, maternal diabetes, high levels of anxiety or stress, periodontal disease, mothers age that is younger than 18 or older than 35, a prior preterm delivery, multiple gestation pregnancies, and use of tobacco and alcohol.

Complications that preemies may face include cerebral palsy, developmental disability, respiratory distress syndrome, and feeding difficulties. Later in life, children born prematurely may have difficulty in school, exhibit behavioral problems, and have delayed motor development – all which may require professional intervention.

In a perfect world, we could prevent all preterm births. Current medical strategies used if the mother has not gone into premature labor include controlling risk factors like standing on feet for long hours and reducing stress. Delaying the birth by ordering

complete bed rest and thus reducing pressure on the cervix, ensuring proper nutrition and hydration, and use of anti-contraction medications may help for a short time in delaying delivery. Taking folic acid for more than a year before birth can reduce the risk of a premature delivery by 50 to 70 percent. (3)

As part of a new initiative under the Guilford County Coalition on Infant Mortality, the Community Action for Healthy Babies Consortium is spearheading a preterm labor prevention program on the benefits of 17P. Injections of 17P (alpha hydroxyprogesterone caproate), have resulted in a 33% reduction in the rate of preterm delivery prior to 35 weeks gestation and a 42% reduction prior to 32 weeks gestation. Candidates for 17P injections must have a singleton gestation and must have had a previous preterm delivery of a singleton. Injections are given weekly starting at 16 weeks gestation and continuing to 36 weeks, 6 days gestation. Make sure to ask your provider if 17P would be a good choice for you. (4)

All women are encouraged to access prenatal care as early as possible, maintain a healthy diet, exercise regularly, avoid smoking, and take a multivitamin with 400 mcg of folic acid daily. Let's do all we can to prevent premature birth. All babies deserve a healthy start in life.

1. National Vital Statistics Reports, 2006.
2. March of Dimes
3. Department of Community and Preventative Medicine, Mount Sinai School of Medicine, 2006.
4. UNC Center for Maternal and Infant Health