

Reducing Your Risk of Preterm Labor

For most women pregnancy lasts about 40 weeks, but sometimes your baby unexpectedly arrives sooner.

Preterm labor is labor that happens between 20 and 37 weeks of pregnancy. Preterm labor can lead to premature birth, which can cause serious health problems for your baby at birth and later in life.

Your baby needs about 40 weeks in the womb to grow. For example, the brain, lungs, and liver need those final weeks to fully develop.

Preterm labor causes your uterus to contract and your cervix to dilate before your baby is ready to come out.

It is characterized by more regular and stronger contractions than Braxton Hicks contractions, which tend to be weaker and are not evenly spaced apart.

There are several risk factors for preterm labor and premature birth. Some of these risk factors are "modifiable," meaning they can be changed to reduce risk. Other risk factors cannot be changed.

Risk factors for pre-term labor you cannot change include ethnicity. For example, African American mothers are more likely to deliver early compared to Caucasian mothers but because differences in the quality of healthcare may likely play a role, this risk can be somewhat modifiable.

Another uncontrollable risk factor is Age. Women older than 35 years old are at risk for preterm delivery because they are more likely to have other health conditions that can cause complications like high blood pressure or diabetes. Pregnant women who are younger than 18 when they deliver are also at increased risk for preterm birth.

Other risk factors for preterm labor include:

"Certainly, the biggest one again is a prior history of preterm labor or preterm birth. Preterm labor in itself is something that is at risk in patients that have an infection and patients that have placental abruption meaning that placenta is partially starting to detach. Sometimes early bleeding in labor or in your pregnancy can also cause a risk factor for preterm labor."

While there are several risk factors you cannot change, here are some ways you can reduce your risk for preterm labor.

Make sure you maintain a healthy weight during your pregnancy. Quit smoking, don't drink alcohol, use street drugs or abuse prescription drugs.

Go to all your prenatal checkups. Be sure to get vaccinated. Talk to your doctor about which vaccines will protect you and your baby against infection and get vaccinated.

Reduce your stress if you have extreme stressors in your life. If stress is one of your risk factors, talk to your healthcare provider about ways to reduce stress.

You may decide to take a relaxing exercise class like pregnancy yoga, ask friends or family for help around the house, time manage to get more rest or find other relaxation techniques that work for you.

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Make sure you eat healthy foods such as fruits and veggies, whole grains, and proteins. And try to exercise every day.

If you have any of these symptoms before 37 weeks of pregnancy, call your doctor right away: Four or more regular or frequent contractions in one hour. The contractions may or may not be painful.

Changes in vaginal discharge or more vaginal discharge than usual. Your water breaks.

Your doctor will do tests to determine if you are in preterm labor including listening to your baby's heart on a fetal monitor, a cervical exam to monitor dilation, checking to see if you are dehydrated, and if you have any infections or bleeding.

If you are in preterm labor, you may need to stay in the hospital for a few days or until you deliver. During this time, you may see different health care providers including a neonatologist or a high-risk obstetrician.

While there are risk factors of preterm labor you cannot change, there are some risk factors you can change like diet and exercise.

Watch for the signs and symptoms you may be going into pre-term labor and ask your doctor when you should call.