

FACT SHEET #2 SHORT- AND LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF PRETERM BIRTH

Preterm birth is the leading cause of newborn death. Advances in neonatal care and treatments for preterm babies have greatly increased the chances for survival of even the smallest babies. But survival is not the only outcome measure. Babies born before 37 weeks are still vulnerable to increased risk for death and to many short-term and long-term effects of premature birth. All babies born preterm are at risk for serious health problems. Even babies born only 4 to 6 weeks early can have effects from the preterm birth, such as breathing difficulties, feeding problems, jaundice, and effects on brain functions.

SHORT-TERM EFFECTS OF PRETERM BIRTH INCLUDE:

- Preterm babies often require special care in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU). In general, the earlier the preterm infant, the more likelihood of life support needed, meaning a longer stay in the NICU.
- Preterm babies are at higher risk of death after they go home from the hospital.
- Preterm babies are at higher risk of being readmitted to the hospital.
- Two of the most serious problems of preterm birth are respiratory distress and immature brains.
 - Serious breathing problems are common in premature infants, and may even require that the baby be put on life support (ventilators). These babies may have breathing problems through the first year of life, and increased risk for asthma later.
 - The brain is the last major organ to mature in babies. The immature brain continues to develop even after the time of birth. The more prematurely the baby is born, the more likely it is that bleeding or other signs of stress will affect the brain. Even at 35 weeks, the baby's brain weighs only two-thirds what it will weigh at term (about 40 weeks). If the baby is born early, even just a few weeks early, this important brain growth takes place in an abnormal environment (outside the womb).

LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF PRETERM BIRTH INCLUDE:

- Preterm babies can suffer lifelong effects, such as cerebral palsy, mental retardation, visual and hearing impairments, and poor health and growth.
- Even babies who are only a few weeks early (late preterm, 34-36 weeks) often have long-term difficulties, such as:
 - Behavioral and social-emotional problems

- Learning difficulties
- Increased risk of conditions such as ADHD (Attention Deficit-Hyperactivity Disorder)
- Increased risk for SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome).
- Children born prematurely are more likely to require early intervention services and special education services.
- Children born prematurely are more likely to have chronic diseases as adults, like heart disease, hypertension, and diabetes.

Encourage mothers to work with their health care provider to maximize the chances of a healthy, full-term pregnancy. ***Healthy Babies are Worth the Wait!***

REFERENCES

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