

## WHAT IS PRETERM BIRTH?

Preterm birth is birth that happens too early, before 37 weeks of pregnancy. Preterm babies are more likely than full-term babies to have problems at birth and later in life. Full-term babies are born at about 40 weeks. Today, special medical care can help many preterm babies live. But preterm birth is still the number one cause of newborn death in the United States.

Even babies born just a few weeks early — at 34 to 36 weeks of pregnancy — can have serious health problems. These babies are called late preterm babies and are born 4 to 6 weeks before their due date. Staying pregnant until the baby is full-term is best, unless there are medical reasons that make it unsafe for the mother or baby.

## WHAT ARE THE EARLY EFFECTS OF PRETERM BIRTH?

Preterm babies are more likely than full-term babies to have problems early in life. These problems can include:

- Respiratory distress. This is a serious breathing problem. Preterm babies may need a machine called a ventilator to help them breathe.
- Brains that are not fully grown. A baby's brain is the last major organ to develop. Even at 35 weeks, a baby's brain weighs only 2/3 of what it will weigh at 40 weeks. The best place for a baby's brain to grow is when the baby is still in the mother's womb. The earlier a baby is born, the more likely the brain is to have bleeding or other problems.
- Jaundice. Jaundice is a condition where a baby's skin and the white parts of the eyes look yellow. Jaundice in babies can cause brain damage if it's extreme and not treated.
- A longer hospital stay. Preterm babies often need special care in a neonatal intensive care unit (NICU). The earlier a baby is born, the longer the baby may have to stay in the hospital.
- A higher risk of dying after coming home from the hospital.
- Going back to the hospital later because of medical problems.

## WHAT ARE THE LATER EFFECTS OF PRETERM BIRTH?

Preterm babies (even late preterm babies) can have problems later in life. These problems can include:

- Health problems like cerebral palsy, mental retardation, slow growth and problems seeing and hearing. Cerebral palsy is a condition where the person has almost no control over their muscles or movements.
- Learning problems. Children born early may need special education services to help them learn.

- Behavior problems like Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).
- As infants, they are more likely to have Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS).
- As children, they are more likely to have breathing problems like asthma.
- As adults, they are more likely to develop heart disease, high blood pressure or diabetes.