

## Is my baby coming too early? Understanding Preterm Labor

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Normal labor begins after 37 weeks. Your "due date" is set at 40 weeks. If labor begins before 37 weeks, it's too soon.....preterm labor. About 1 in 10 pregnancies in the U.S. have a premature baby. But what about the patients that "don't feel good", may feel they're "too big", or just "want the baby out". A premature baby -or "preemie"- can suffer serious illness, both acute and chronic; some could even suffer insurmountable complications leading to death. The earlier a baby is born, the greater the chance of health problems. Preemies grow more slowly, and may have problems with their eyes, ears, breathing, and nervous system. Learning and behavioral problems are more common in children born premature.

John Knapp M.D.

Signs that labor may be starting early include an increase in discharge (watery, mucous, or bloody), pelvic or lower abdominal pressure, constant low back pain, regular or frequent contractions, abdominal cramps, ruptured membranes (gush or persistent leak of fluid). If you are earlier than 36 weeks, and have more than 4-6 contractions in an hour that don't go away with rest and fluids, let your practitioner know.

Your doctor can diagnose preterm labor and may be able to stop labor or buy some time to allow your baby to further mature and lower the risks to your child. Informing your provider as early as possible gives the best chance at stopping early labor. Unfortunately, some babies come early despite all efforts. Having excellent close pediatric care and special units to take care of these babies are very important.

We can diagnose early labor by monitoring contractions, and checking for cervical dilation. Testing with ultrasound and fetal fibronectin can be very helpful.

What can I do to help my baby stay put? If you've had a history of preterm labor, let your doc know! You can be placed on a progesterone hormone. It can reduce preterm labor by 30%. Also, the following are well known causes of prematurity: smoking, cocaine use, being underweight, little or no prenatal care, poor nutrition, prior prematurity, twins, too much amniotic fluid, infection while pregnant, and bleeding. Change the risks you can control.

Well, I hope you have learned some about a common and serious problem. You can help your baby by changing some habits and being aware of early signs. Letting your doc know early gives your best chance at stopping or delaying preterm birth. Good Luck!

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