



Premature Infants

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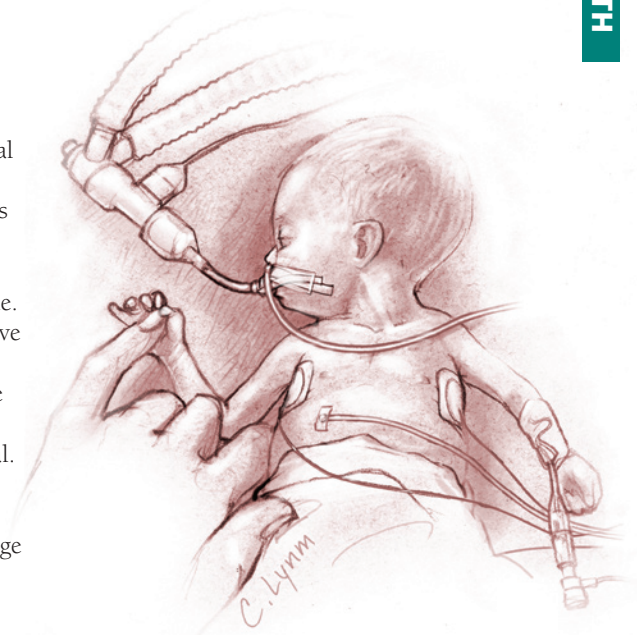
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Premature Infants

During a pregnancy, the baby grows in the mother's **uterus** (womb) usually for 38 to 40 weeks. When a baby is born **prematurely** (too early), the baby may require special medical care. The level of extra care needed often depends on how early the birth occurs. Premature babies weigh much less than full-term infants because they have not had the full amount of time for growth inside the uterus.

Babies born very early in pregnancy are extremely small and fragile. They may weigh less than 2 pounds. They require specialized intensive care in a **neonatal intensive care unit (NICU)**. Doctors and nurses who work in NICUs have specialized education to care for premature infants and their problems. Health problems for babies who are born prematurely may not end when the baby goes home from the hospital. They may need special medical care as they grow older.

The July 20, 2005, issue of *JAMA* includes an article about the development of children who were born prematurely. This Patient Page is adapted from one published in the February 12, 2003, issue.



EARLY PROBLEMS FOR PREMATURE INFANTS

- Inability to breathe or breathe regularly on their own due to underdeveloped lungs
- Body temperature regulation (the baby cannot maintain his or her own body heat)
- Feeding and growth problems because of an immature digestive system
- **Jaundice** (yellowing of skin and possible brain damage due to buildup of **bilirubin**, a blood breakdown product)
- **Anemia** (not enough red blood cells to carry oxygen to tissues)
- **Intracranial hemorrhage** (bleeding into the brain)

PROBLEMS PREMATURE INFANTS FACE AS THEY GROW OLDER

- **Apnea**, episodes of stopping breathing, which may require special monitoring, even at home
- **Bronchopulmonary dysplasia**, a chronic lung disease that may or may not improve as the child grows
- Hearing or vision problems related to immature nerves or treatment side effects
- Developmental delay and learning disabilities from brain damage related to immaturity

Because premature babies can be very ill, especially extremely premature infants, decisions about treatments can be difficult for parents, doctors, and nurses. Medical research studies provide information about treatments and the likely course of an illness, but they cannot predict how each baby will recover from being born too early.

Regular **prenatal** (before birth) medical care, avoiding any exposure to tobacco smoke, avoiding alcohol and illegal substances, and control of chronic medical problems are important during every pregnancy.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- American Academy of Pediatrics
847/434-4000
www.aap.org
- National Institute of Child Health and Human Development
800/370-2943
www.nichd.nih.gov
- Nemours Foundation's Center for Children's Health Media
www.kidshealth.org

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Sources: American Academy of Pediatrics, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, Nemours Foundation (KidsHealth)

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