

Preterm Birth: Steps to help prevent it

What is preterm birth?

A **preterm birth** is when a baby is born too early—before 37 weeks of pregnancy. Preterm births fall into 2 groups:

- **When birth is recommended and started by your doctor.** This is called **medically-indicated preterm birth**. A doctor will suggest an early delivery if either your baby or you have a health condition that makes continuing the pregnancy dangerous.
- **A birth that starts on its own.** This is called **spontaneous preterm birth**. This happens when a woman goes into preterm labor or when her water breaks too early. Once preterm labor is advanced or the water breaks, an early birth will usually happen.

Babies who are born too early (**preemies**) may not be completely developed, and they have a greater chance of having health problems. The earlier in pregnancy a baby is born, the higher the risk of having both short-term and long-term problems.

What causes preterm birth?

Many cases of preterm birth have no known cause. Even preeclampsia [pree-eh-KLAMP-see-uh], a common reason for a medically indicated preterm delivery, isn't well understood. However, researchers have learned that preterm birth—indicated or spontaneous—is more common in women with certain risk factors.



What do I do next?

Follow the steps below to lower your chance of having a preterm birth, and to protect your baby from possible complications. (See **page 2** of this handout for pregnancy planning steps you can take.)

- 1 Maintain a healthy weight.** Both underweight and overweight women have an increased risk of preterm delivery. Ideally, your body mass index (BMI) should be between 18.5 and 24.9 when you get pregnant. If you're outside of this target range, ask your doctor what you can do to get there.

BMI is calculated based on your height and weight. You can learn your BMI by checking online here: www.nhlbi.nih.gov/guidelines/obesity/BMI/bmicalc.htm
- 2 Don't smoke and don't use substances that increase the risk of preterm birth.** Smoking is a major risk factor for preterm birth. So is using certain prescription pain medicine (opioids) or other substances like cocaine and methamphetamine (meth).
- 3 Take a multivitamin with at least 400 mcg of folic acid.** Experts recommend that every woman of childbearing age take 400 mcg of folic acid daily, even if she's not planning to become pregnant, to prevent certain birth defects.
- 4 Get good control of any chronic conditions.** Controlling any long-term health problems can help you have a healthier pregnancy—and a healthy, full-term baby.

