

November is Premature Infant Awareness Month; a month that focuses on bringing awareness to premature infants (preemies) and the many challenges they may face. On average, more than 1 in 10 babies are born prematurely. A baby is considered premature if he or she is born before 37 weeks gestation. Many might wonder why it is so critical when an infant is born early. Prematurity disrupts a baby's development in the womb, meaning many of their organs and immune systems are not fully developed. Because of this, preemies are more likely to develop serious infections and are more susceptible to respiratory complications.

Every baby has unique needs, usually correlated to how premature they are born. They often spend time after delivery in a neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) which provides a safe environment for them to grow and develop. Premature babies often lack the body fat to maintain their body temperature, therefore they are placed in incubators or on radiant warmers. And because their digestive systems are not fully developed, they may receive feedings through a tube. Some babies may need to spend weeks or even months in a NICU and can often face lifelong, more permanent complications such as cerebral palsy, respiratory problems, vision problems, hearing loss among many other disabilities. Meanwhile this can create a strain on families (both mentally and financially) and is especially hard for those with other children at home to care for.

Some might ask, what causes premature birth? Although the causes of prematurity aren't yet fully understood and there is no one definite cause of preterm delivery, certain conditions and risk factors are associated with an early birth. Prematurity can occur after complications during pregnancy such as gestational diabetes, hypertension, heart or kidney problems, and infection and bleeding. Carrying multiples also increases the risk of prematurity, as do certain lifestyle factors including poor nutrition, smoking, drug use or excessive alcohol consumption during pregnancy.

Raising awareness of premature birth is the first step to defeating it. Preventing complications starts with a healthy pregnancy. Interventions such as education on a healthy diet, tobacco, drug and alcohol use; measuring the fetus using ultrasound technology to determine gestational age, detection of birth defects and detecting multiple pregnancies. It is strongly encouraged to have a minimum of 8 contacts with health professionals throughout the pregnancy to identify and manage other risk factors such as infections, diabetes and high blood pressure. Studies indicate that the hormone progesterone, when given in mid-pregnancy, can decrease the rate of preterm delivery by 30 percent in women who have had a previous preterm birth. More than three quarters of premature babies can be saved with feasible, cost-effective care such as essential care during childbirth and in the postnatal period for every mother and baby, use of corticosteroid injections (given to pregnant women at risk of preterm labor to strengthen the baby's lungs), skin-to-skin contact between mother and baby, and antibiotics to treat newborn infections.

Even though the chances are still high that most women will go on to have a healthy, full-term pregnancy, it is important to understand prematurity and the risks that are involved. Reduce your risk by taking the necessary steps to protect yourself and your baby during pregnancy.

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