Preterm Birth

After Experiencing a Preterm Birth

What Is Preterm Birth?

Preterm birth (PTB) is any birth before 37 weeks of pregnancy and occurs in about one in 10 pregnancies in the United States. The underlying cause of most PTBs is unknown. Most PTBs cannot be prevented.

There are two types of PTB — spontaneous and indicated.

Spontaneous PTB results from natural events, including:

- When the body naturally goes into labor prematurely
- When the amniotic membrane (bag of water) breaks, called rupture of membranes (ROM)
- When the cervix dilates silently, called cervical insufficiency

Indicated PTB occurs when the mother or fetus (unborn baby) has a serious health condition that could be harmful to either of them, such as:

- Medical conditions of the mother (severe high blood pressure, diabetes, obesity)
- Fetal growth restriction
- Placenta previa (the placenta partially or completely covers the cervix opening)
- Bleeding from the uterus (womb)
- Abnormal fetal heart rate
- Prior surgery of the uterus (some types of C-section or fibroid removal)
- Certain other reasons

Am I at Risk of Having Another PTB?

If you have had a PTB, there is a chance of another PTB in future pregnancies. Several other factors may put you at higher risk of having a PTB, such as:

- Pregnancy with twins, triplets or more fetuses
- Problems with the cervix or uterus
- Certain health conditions (high blood pressure, malnutrition, obesity, diabetes, vaginal bleeding, infection)
- Mother is over age 40
- Tobacco, drug or alcohol use
- Exposure to environmental pollutants

How Can I Reduce My Chances of Another PTB?

Before Pregnancy

There are several steps you can take to improve your overall health that may reduce risks of PTB, such as:

- Wait 18 to 24 months to become pregnant again. Use a reliable form of contraception (birth control) until at least 18 months after giving birth.
- Stop all tobacco products (smoking, vaping, snuff, chewing tobacco).
- Stop marijuana use.
- Stop illicit drug use.
- Aim for a healthy body weight by exercising regularly and eating healthful foods.
- Work with your doctor to manage any medical problems, such as diabetes and high blood pressure, before you get pregnant again.
- Ask your doctor if your current medications are safe during pregnancy.
- Take a prenatal vitamin every day before and during pregnancy.

Your doctor may recommend a consultation with a maternal-fetal medicine (MFM) specialist to help you plan for subsequent pregnancies.

During Pregnancy

After a Spontaneous PTB

Two ways to reduce the risks of another PTB after a spontaneous PTB include:

- Ultrasounds to check your cervix length. If your cervix is short or showing other changes, your doctor may recommend specific treatments.
- A progesterone supplement (a natural hormone) or similar medication may help reduce the chance of another PTB.

After an Indicated PTB

Common reasons for an indicated PTB are preeclampsia, high blood pressure and fetal growth restriction. If you had one of these, you might need:

- Low-dose aspirin starting at 12 weeks of pregnancy to reduce the risks of preeclampsia, fetal growth restriction and spontaneous PTB. Ask your doctor or MFM specialist if you are a good candidate for low-dose aspirin.
- Ultrasound exams during the last few months of pregnancy to check fetal growth.

If you had another indication for PTB, discuss with your doctor whether there is any special management that may reduce the chances of a repeat PTB.

How Does a Preterm Birth Affect My Long-term Health?

Women who have given birth prematurely are at higher risk for certain health problems later in life, sometimes soon after birth, sometimes many years or even decades later. These problems are part of "metabolic syndrome," which includes one or more of the following:

- High blood pressure
- Heart disease
- Stroke
- Type 2 diabetes
- Excess body fat around the waist
- Abnormal cholesterol and triglyceride levels

How Can I Reduce My Risks of Future Health Problems?

- Breastfeed as long as you can — Breastfeeding reduces your risk of diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease and may help you lose weight after delivery.
- Stay active — Exercise moderately 30 minutes a day, several days a week. Even a 30-minute walk can help.
- Aim for a healthy body weight by eating a healthful diet and exercising.
- Quit using tobacco, vaping products and illicit drugs.
- Make sure your primary care provider is aware of your PTB history. Discuss whether you should have testing every year for blood pressure, diabetes, cholesterol and triglyceride.

Additional Resources:

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
nichd.nih.gov/health/topics/preterm/conditioninfo/who_risk#

Cleveland Clinic
my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/21479-premature-birth

pediatrix & obstetrix

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