

FACT SHEET #4 THE PROBLEM WITH LATE PRETERM BIRTH

WHAT IS LATE PRETERM BIRTH?

Late preterm birth happens when a baby is born after 34 weeks gestation and before 37 weeks. This is more than a month too soon, and the baby's major organs have not had the normal amount of time to mature. It's helpful to know that a woman's due date is based on 40 full weeks of pregnancy. That means that at 36 weeks, the baby still needs another month to continue growing, in order to enter the world with appropriately developed organs and systems. Because the baby is growing, the last month of pregnancy can be uncomfortable for the mother; she needs our support to encourage her that a healthy baby is worth the wait!

WHY WAIT?

- Because the baby's due date is only an estimate.
 - The due date for the baby is an *estimated* date, and can be off by 2 weeks either way, even using ultrasound for setting the date. This means that a woman might be 38 weeks pregnant based on her *estimated* due date, only to discover at birth that her baby appears to be 36 weeks developed on exam. This is important, because at 36 weeks, the baby has not yet matured and may have more problems than if born at term, and some of the problems are very serious.
- Because the baby's brain is underdeveloped.
 - The baby's brain is the last major organ to develop. At 35 weeks, the baby's brain weighs only two-thirds of what it will weigh at full-term. The part of the brain we use for thinking, the cerebral cortex, almost doubles in size during those last few weeks. Huge numbers of connections between brain cells and different areas of the brain are being formed during that time. So it is very important that the baby remain in the protected environment of the womb while these changes are taking place (unless there are medical reasons that make it unsafe for the mother or the baby).
- Because late preterm babies have more health problems.
 - Late preterm babies, born between 4 and 6 weeks early, have a higher rate of many health problems than full-term babies. Compared to full-term babies, late preterm babies are more likely to have:
 - Breathing problems, which can be serious enough for the baby to need a ventilator
 - Difficulty maintaining normal temperature
 - Difficulty with blood sugar and feeding, with poor suck/swallow abilities
 - Newborn jaundice, which can cause brain damage if it goes unusually high

- A longer hospital stay (or go home, only to be re-admitted with problems later)
- Smaller and less developed brains at the time of birth
- Higher rate of re-admission to the hospital during infancy
- Increased risk for sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS)
- Increased risk for ADHD, hyperactivity, behavior and learning problems
- Higher risk for chronic diseases like diabetes and heart disease in adulthood

Encourage pregnant women to discuss ways to prevent preterm birth with their health care provider to determine the best way to get the benefits of a healthy, full-term pregnancy. While the last few weeks of pregnancy are challenging, they are important to ensure a baby's full development. *Healthy Babies are Worth the Wait!*

REFERENCES

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