

Born Early (Preterm): Health Concerns

Because preterm (premature) babies are born before they are physically ready to leave the womb, they often have health problems. These newborns have higher rates of disabilities (such as cerebral palsy) and even death.

Because of these health concerns, preterm babies are given extra medical attention and assistance immediately after delivery. Depending on how early the baby has arrived, your pediatrician or obstetrician may call in a neonatologist (a pediatrician who specializes in the care of preterm or very ill babies) to help determine what, if any, special treatment the infant needs.

Here are some of the most common conditions that occur in preterm infants:

Respiratory distress syndrome is a breathing disorder related to the baby's immature lungs. It occurs because the lungs of preterm babies often lack surfactant, a liquid substance that allows the lungs to remain expanded. Artificial surfactants can be used to treat these babies, along with a ventilator to help them breathe better and maintain adequate oxygen levels in their blood. Sometimes, extremely preterm babies may need long term oxygen treatment and occasionally may go home on supportive oxygen therapy.

Bronchopulmonary dysplasia, or chronic lung disease, is a term used to describe babies who require oxygen for several weeks or months. They tend to outgrow this uncommon condition, which varies in severity, as their lungs grow and mature.

Apnea is a temporary pause (more than fifteen seconds) in breathing that is common in preterm infants. It often is associated with a decline in the heart rate, called bradycardia. A drop in oxygen saturation as measured by a machine called *pulse oximetry* is called desaturation. Most infants outgrow the condition by the time they leave the

hospital for home. *Retinopathy of prematurity* (ROP) is an eye disease in which the retina is not fully developed. Most cases resolve without treatment, although serious cases may need treatment, including laser surgery in the most severe instances. Your infant may be examined by a pediatric ophthalmologist or retina specialist to diagnose and, if needed, recommend treatment for this condition.

Jaundice happens when a chemical called *bilirubin* builds up in the baby's blood. As a result, the skin may develop a yellowish color. Jaundice can occur in babies of any race or color. Treating it involves placing the undressed baby under special lights (while her eyes are covered to protect them). Other conditions sometimes seen in preterm babies include anemia of prematurity (a low red blood cell count) and heart murmurs.

Resources

HealthyChildren.org (AAP Parenting Web site)
www.healthychildren.com

March of Dimes
www.marchofdimes.org
1-914-997-4488

American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists
www.acog.org
1-202-638-5577

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From your doctor

American Academy
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