Preterm Labor

Preterm Labor is labor that happens before 37 weeks of pregnancy. Babies born too soon can have serious health problems after birth. These problems may be life-threatening and/or may be life-long.

Sometimes women are given drugs through their veins (intravenous, or IV) to try to stop preterm labor or to mature the baby’s lungs if the baby is born too early.

Warning signs of preterm labor:

- Pelvic pressure (the feeling that your baby is pushing down)
- Menstrual-like cramps
- Watery or bloody vaginal discharge (leaking fluid or bleeding from your vagina)
- Low back pain
- Contractions (your abdomen tightens and relaxes every 10 minutes or more often)
- Abdominal cramps with or without diarrhea

If you think you are having preterm labor call your health care provider (nurse practitioner, nurse midwife, or doctor) or go to the hospital immediately.

If your symptoms get worse or do not go away after 1 hour, go to the hospital. If the symptoms get better, relax for the rest of the day.

Preterm labor and delivery can happen to any woman, but there are some risk factors for preterm labor. (Having one or more risk factors does not mean a woman will have preterm labor or preterm delivery, just that she is at higher risk.)
Risk Factors for preterm labor

Women who:

- Have had a previous preterm birth
- Are pregnant with twins, triplets, or more
- Have certain uterine or cervical abnormalities
- Have late or no prenatal care
- Smoke
- Drink alcohol
- Use illegal drugs
- Are victims of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse
- Have little or no social support
- Have a high stress level
- Work long hours, especially if that includes long periods of standing
- Have vaginal infections, sexually transmitted diseases, or frequent urinary tract infections
- Have diabetes
- Have high blood pressure
- Have clotting disorders
- Are underweight
- Are overweight
- Become pregnant within a short time after giving birth (less than 9 months between giving birth and becoming pregnant again)
- Are younger than 17 or older than 35
Things you can do

- Get prenatal care- make an appointment as soon as you think you are pregnant and keep every appointment. It is also a good idea to see your health care provider before you get pregnant.

- If you smoke, STOP. It is best to stop before you get pregnant.

- Do not drink alcohol!

- If you use drugs or herbal remedies or supplements that are not prescribed by your health care provider, stop using them. It is best to stop before you get pregnant. If you are using illegal drugs and have trouble stopping, ask for help! Your health care provider knows someone who can help.

- Try to reduce stress. Ask friends or family for help. Rest and relax when you can.

- If you are in an abusive relationship, talk to your health care provider. Your health care provider knows someone who can help. Abuse often gets worse during pregnancy.

- If you feel pain or burning when you urinate, you may have an infection. Talk to your health care provider.

- Know the signs of preterm labor and what to do if you have any of them.