



Fast Facts

What You Need to Know About Premature Birth

If you have had a premature baby before or have a short cervix too soon during this pregnancy, you can take progesterone medicine to help give your baby the best chance for a healthy birth.

What is premature birth?

Premature birth is when a baby is born before 37 full weeks of pregnancy. Babies born too soon don't have time to fully develop their brains or other organs. Many face long hospitalizations and have delays in growth or learning, or even lifelong disabilities. Babies born at 40 full weeks of pregnancy have a much better chance of a healthy start.

How do I know if my baby is at risk of premature birth?

Experts don't know all of the causes of premature birth, but we do know some things that put your baby at higher risk:

- Health problems (like diabetes, poor nutrition, underweight, or overweight)
- Age (younger than 17 or older than 40)
- Lifestyle choices (like smoking, alcohol, or drugs)
- Race (African American women are at highest risk)
- Carrying twins or triplets
- Having babies too close together
- Having a premature baby in a previous pregnancy (read more below)
- Short cervix too early in this pregnancy (read more below)

I had a premature baby before. Now what?

If you've had a premature birth during a past pregnancy, a weekly shot of a progesterone-like medicine—called 17-OHPC—can help prevent premature birth this time. It's best for your baby if these shots start about 16 weeks of pregnancy. Ask about progesterone at your next prenatal appointment.

What is a short cervix?

The cervix is the opening from the uterus to the vagina that shortens (effaces) and opens (dilates) at the end of pregnancy so that the baby can enter the birth canal. If this happens too early, it means the pregnancy is at risk of premature birth because you might go into labor.

Your healthcare provider can check the length of your cervix between 18 and 24 weeks of pregnancy. The test can be done by vaginal ultrasound or with a disposable measuring device. If the test shows a short cervix, your doctor may prescribe a vaginal progesterone gel that can help keep your cervix from shortening more to help prevent premature birth.

What can I do to have the healthiest pregnancy possible?

- Be sure to go to all of your prenatal visits.
- Always ask your healthcare provider questions to find out what you should do to stay healthy and help your baby.
- Tell your provider if you've had a premature baby before.
- Ask to have your cervix measured to test for premature short cervix.
- If you are given progesterone medicine, follow all instructions and don't miss a dose.



How do I know if premature labor is starting and what should I do?

If you are feeling regular, frequent contractions, back pain or pressure, bleeding, have bloody mucus, or if you think your water broke, call your provider right away! You may need to be checked for premature labor.



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