

preventing premature births

The arrival of a baby is a much anticipated event but for parents of premature babies, the celebration can be mixed with worries. A premature baby is a baby born before 37 weeks of pregnancy. While an early birth can be surprising for the parents, premature births occur in 12% of Kentucky births. The goal for each pregnancy is to reach full term, or a full 40 weeks.

Because premature babies do not get the advantage of staying in the womb until full term, many can face health challenges and development issues. Even though the earlier a child is born, the higher the risk of health problems and death, health problems and delays can occur in babies born even a few weeks early.

Promoting healthy pregnancies is a key strategy in reducing the likelihood of premature babies. While the causes of some premature births are unknown, such as getting pre-eclampsia, there are some preventable factors that decrease the chance of a preterm birth.



PRACTICES FOR PREVENTING PREMATURE BIRTHS

- If possible, plan ahead for pregnancy. Maintain a healthy weight, take folic acid daily and get a health checkup before becoming pregnant.
- Do not smoke, drink alcohol or take drugs while pregnant. The harmful effects of these actions pass directly to the baby through the umbilical cord. This can harm the development of your baby and may also cause lifelong developmental problems for your baby.
- Attend all of your prenatal appointments, even if you feel fine. Blood and urine tests, as well as blood pressure checks, are important in detecting risks to you and your unborn baby.
- Talk to your doctor about taking a prenatal vitamin or iron supplement.
- Do not schedule a cesarean section prior to 39 weeks if there is no medical reason for having one.
- Wait for at least 12-18 months before becoming pregnant again if possible.

Preeclampsia affects 5-8% of pregnant women and is difficult to self detect.

WHAT IS PREECLAMPSIA?

During pregnancy, severe or uncontrolled high blood pressure can cause complications for you and your baby's health. During the third trimester or postpartum period, a woman may be at risk for developing preeclampsia. Preeclampsia is a serious condition that not only affects your blood pressure but can also affect all of your body organs. Preeclampsia can lead to premature births and cause serious health problems for the mother, including seizures. It is a silent threat because many of the symptoms, such as high blood pressure and protein in the urine, are not noticeable to the pregnant mother. This is why regular check-ups with your doctor are very important. Your doctor can monitor your blood pressure and take urine samples to try to spot the condition early. Other symptoms may include headaches that won't go away, seeing spots or changes in eyesight, pain in the upper abdomen or shoulder and edema in the face and hands. Unlike the typical swelling pregnant women may experience in their legs and feet, you can test for edema. Apply gentle pressure to the swollen area with a finger for 15 seconds and when you remove the finger, it will leave a dimple in the skin. While it is possible for preeclampsia to be managed, the only "cure" is delivering the baby.

*This content is intended to serve as general information and not medical advice. Please consult with your doctor if you have any questions.

Sources: <http://www.marchofdimes.org/Peristats/pdflib/195/21.pdf>
<http://www.acog.org/Patients/FAQs/Preeclampsia-and-High-Blood-Pressure-During-Pregnancy>
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caring for your early arrival

Parenting a premature baby can be difficult. As a caregiver, you may find yourself leaving your child in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) after birth or celebrating milestones you never considered before like the first day your child breathes without the help of oxygen. While medical staff primarily look after your baby, you can still play an active role in your child's care while in the hospital. Most NICUs offer 24/7 access for parents to visit and help with routines like taking your child's temperature and changing diapers. You speak for your child. Don't be shy - express your concerns and desires to medical staff or anyone caring for your child. Ask questions to try to understand how to best help your child thrive.



Neema is one of 135 preterm babies born every week in Kentucky.

HELPING YOUR PREMATURE BABY THRIVE

At the hospital

Breastfeeding – Express your desire to breastfeed to the NICU staff. Breast milk helps your child's immune system and brain development. If your child is not able to feed at the breast, pump breast milk to maintain your milk supply, feed it by bottle, or freeze it for later use.

Kangaroo care- Placing your diapered baby on your bare chest skin to skin has medical and emotional benefits for your baby like maintaining body warmth and improved breathing. This technique is a great way for fathers to feel involved too. If you are in the NICU, ask the staff if you can do this with your baby even if he or she is connected to a machine. The policy varies based on the hospital.

Ask to speak with the hospital's NICU social worker. They can help you learn about available resources and explain the technical medical information in easy to understand ways. Many families qualify for assistance even if both parents work and have private insurance.

Check your car seat. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that all infants should ride rear-facing beginning with their first ride home from the hospital. The car seat should be approved for your baby's weight. Premature infants should have a car seat check while still in the hospital to make sure they can sit safely in the car seat as they may need a special seat made for their weight and health condition.

At home

Tummy time- While it is important to place your baby on his or her back for sleep, it is also important to provide your baby tummy time each day to help strengthen muscles in the neck. Tummy time should take place when your baby is awake and alert and an adult is in the room. Premature babies tend to be in a stretched position instead of a natural curled position and this can affect their developmental skills. Kangaroo care is another great way to get tummy time.

Use your child's adjusted age when checking milestones. This helps you have the right expectations of what your child should be able to do as he or she grows. Tracking milestones is important in detecting developmental delays.

Adjusted age- the age your child would be if he or she were born on the predicted due date.

Chronological age- the date your child was actually born.



Neema is now a happy and thriving 15 month old.

Photo credit: The Renauds Photography

Limit interactions with people. Your child's immune system is developing and limiting the number of people your child is around reduces the number of germs he or she is exposed to.

Choose a pediatrician. You may choose to find one who has experience with premature babies. Pick someone you feel comfortable with for the long haul. It is ideal to have the same person monitor your child's development.

Do not smoke around your baby. Premature babies are particularly prone to breathing issues. When you or others smoke around them, they are exposed to secondhand smoke which is linked to asthma, bronchitis and other breathing related issues and Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). For help quitting, call 800-QUIT-NOW.