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Premature babies

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Summary

- The causes of premature labour aren't fully understood, so prediction and prevention are difficult.
- The chances of survival for premature babies depend on the degree of prematurity and their birth weight.
- Premature babies who survive are at risk of a range of mild to severe disabilities, including visual impairment, developmental delay and learning difficulties.

In Australia, around eight per cent of babies are born prematurely (before 37 weeks gestation) every year. Most babies who are premature are born between 32 and 36 weeks gestation, and almost all of these babies grow up to be healthy children.

Sadly, some babies die as a result of being born too early because their organs are too immature to function properly outside the womb.

It is difficult to predict which pregnancies will end prematurely. Most often, no specific cause is found for premature births. We know of a few risk factors, but the mechanics behind premature labour remain a mystery, so it is difficult to prevent.

Risk factors for premature birth

Some reasons for premature birth remain unknown. However, there are a few maternal risk factors, including:

- High blood pressure
- Diabetes
- Severe illness
- Smoking
- Twin or multiple pregnancy
- Previous premature birth.

Delaying premature labour

If a mother goes into labour prematurely, sometimes the birth can be delayed with certain treatments.

As long as the baby is growing normally and the placenta is working properly, every extra day a baby can spend inside the mother's womb increases the chance of survival, particularly if there is time to give the mother steroids. Giving the mother steroid injections before the birth can improve the baby's lung maturity and chances of surviving.

The chance of survival for premature babies

The chance of survival depends on the baby's degree of prematurity and birth weight. A full-term pregnancy is said to last between 37 and 42 weeks.

Two thirds of babies born at 24 weeks gestation who are admitted to a neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) will survive to go home. Ninety eight per cent of babies born at 30 weeks gestation will survive.

Complications for premature babies

In general, babies who are born under 36 weeks' gestation will be admitted to a neonatal unit. Very preterm babies (under 30 weeks' gestation) and those who require help with breathing will need to be cared for in a NICU.

Larger preterm babies who do not develop breathing problems will be cared for in a special care nursery.

Some of the complications for a premature baby might include:

- Lung disease – premature babies often need oxygen via a ventilator or in an incubator until their lungs are fully matured.
- Feeding difficulties – premature babies are often unable to suck and need to be fed via a tube into the stomach until the sucking and swallowing reflex is developed.
- Temperature control difficulties – the 'temperature control centre' in a premature baby's brain is immature. Babies are therefore cared for under special overhead heaters or in enclosed incubators until they are mature enough to be cared for in a normal cot.
- Apnoea – this is when the baby's breathing stops for a short period of time. Breathing is controlled by a part of the brain called the respiratory centre, which is immature in premature babies.
- Bradycardia – is a slowing down of the heart rate, usually caused by apnoea.
- Jaundice – the skin takes on a yellow colour, due to a compound in the blood called bilirubin, which breaks down red blood cells. A premature baby's liver is too immature to process the bilirubin properly, so phototherapy lights are used.

Disabilities for premature babies

In general, the risk of premature babies having severe disabilities depends on their degree of prematurity and the severity of illness they experienced following birth.

Around one third of babies born at 24 weeks will develop a significant disability such as intellectual disability, cerebral palsy, blindness or deafness.

Minor disabilities, such as reading or learning problems, usually do not show up until school age. Babies born close to full term usually have no long-term health problems as a result of their early birth.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your obstetrician
- Maternity hospital staff

Things to remember

- The causes of premature labour aren't fully understood, so prediction and prevention are difficult.
- The chances of survival for premature babies depend on the degree of prematurity and their birth weight.
- Premature babies who survive are at risk of a range of mild to severe disabilities, including visual impairment, developmental delay and learning difficulties.

[References](#)

- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2011. *Australia's mothers and babies 2009*, Perinatal statistics series no. 25. Cat. no. PER 52. [More information here.](#)
- ANZNN (Australian and New Zealand Neonatal Network), 2011. *Report of the Australian and New Zealand Neonatal Network 2007*. [More information here.](#)

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[For children diagnosed with a disability, getting the support they need as early as possible will give them the best chance of minimising the long-term effects of the disability...](#)
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Feeding your baby

- [Asthma - pregnancy and breastfeeding](#)

[Pregnant women with asthma need to continue to take their asthma medication as it is important to the health of both mother and baby that the mother's asthma is well managed...](#)

- [Baby care - weaning](#)

[Be guided by your baby and let them set the pace when weaning and introducing solid foods...](#)

- [Bottle feeding - nutrition and safety](#)

[Breastmilk or commercial infant formula is necessary for all babies less than 12 months...](#)

- [Breastfeeding](#)

[Breastfeeding positioning and attachment come naturally to some babies and mothers, but many need time and practice to get it right...](#)

- [Breastfeeding and travel](#)

[Breastmilk protects your baby from illness and infection, so it is the safest drink for your baby while travelling...](#)

- [Breastfeeding and work](#)
[You can successfully combine breastfeeding with work if you have support from your employer, colleagues and family...](#)
- [Breastfeeding and your diet](#)
[Breastfeeding women need to eat regularly and include a wide variety of healthy foods in their diet...](#)
- [Breastfeeding - dealing with mastitis](#)
[Mastitis affects some breastfeeding women and may be caused by blocked milk ducts or a bacterial infection...](#)
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[Your nipples may be sensitive in the first few days after birth, but nipple pain is not a normal part of breastfeeding...](#)
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[Let your baby feed as much as they want in the first few days to help establish good breastfeeding patterns...](#)
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[Breastfeeding within the first hour after birth allows your baby to behave instinctively and breastfeed with little intervention...](#)
- [Food for babies - tucker talk tips](#)
[Before six months, breastmilk or formula is the only food and drink that your baby needs...](#)
- [Lactose intolerance](#)
[Symptoms of lactose intolerance include bloating, gas, abdominal pain and diarrhoea...](#)

Growth and development

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[Infants in the first eight weeks have no control over their movements and all their physical activity is involuntary or reflex...](#)
- [Child development \(2\) - three to six months](#)
[Young babies still have a notion that the whole of life is happening inside themselves, and they are 'making it all happen'...](#)
- [Child development \(3\) - six to nine months](#)
[Fun activities, such as shaking or banging objects, helps a baby understand they have an effect on the world...](#)
- [Child development \(4\) - nine to 12 months](#)
[At nine months your baby is moving around by crawling or pulling along with their arms. Safety is very important now. Your baby is also 'talking' with recognisable sounds and may even say simple words...](#)
- [Child development \(5\) - one to two years](#)
[Between the age of one and two, your toddler understands they are a completely separate person from you...](#)
- [Child development \(6\) - two to three years](#)
[Parents can be tricked into thinking our toddlers are more grown up than they really are...](#)
- [Children's feet and shoes](#)
[A child learning to walk receives important sensory information from the soles of their feet, and shoes can make walking more difficult...](#)
- [Growth charts for children](#)
[Babies and young children do not usually grow in a perfectly smooth way, but instead grow in 'bursts'...](#)
- [Teeth development in children](#)
[Teething symptoms are common in children and can be managed without medications...](#)
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- [Toilet training](#)
[When toilet training your toddler, praise every little success and remain calm about accidents...](#)

Behaviour and learning

- [10 tips for managing sibling rivalry](#)
[Teach your children to sort out minor differences themselves... 10 tips for managing sibling rivalry...](#)
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[You can help your child overcome anxiety by taking their fears seriously and encouraging them to talk about their feelings...](#)
- [Children and shyness](#)
[If your child's shyness is especially debilitating, you may like to consider professional help from a counsellor or psychologist...](#)
- [Children and sibling rivalry](#)
[Sibling rivalry is a common problem, particularly among children who are the same sex and close together in age...](#)
- [Discipline and children](#)
[Disciplining your child means teaching them responsible behaviour and self-control...](#)
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[Dummy sucking should stop before school age to avoid teeth or mouth problems...](#)
- [Left-handedness](#)
[If your child is naturally left-handed, don't try to force them to use their right hand...](#)
- [Tantrums](#)
[When a young child is having a tantrum, it is because the emotional \(limbic system\) part of the brain is dominating the child's behaviour...](#)
- [Thumb and finger sucking](#)
[Finger or thumb sucking should stop before school age to avoid mouth problems...](#)
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- [Breakfast](#)
[Children who skip breakfast may lack sufficient vitamins and minerals including iron, calcium, zinc and vitamin B2...](#)
- [Childcare and healthy eating](#)
[Childcare centres should provide healthy meals for your children...](#)
- [Children's diet - fruit and vegetables](#)
[If you eat and enjoy fruit and vegetables every day, your child may eventually follow your lead...](#)
- [Eating tips for babies](#)
[First foods for babies can be prepared easily and cheaply at home without salt, seasonings and sweeteners...](#)
- [Eating tips for children \(3\) - older toddlers](#)
[Offer children the same foods as the family, with a variety of textures and flavours for balanced nutrition...](#)
- [Eating tips for young toddlers](#)

[Children have a natural ability to sense when they are hungry and when they are full...](#)

- [Soft drinks, juice and sweet drinks - children](#)

[Encourage children to drink and enjoy water. Sweet drinks such as juice, cordial and soft drinks may cause health problems for children if consumed in large amounts...](#)

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- [Dental checks for young children](#)

[Children should have an oral health check by the time they turn two...](#)

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[Vaccinations are encouraged for all individuals living in the state of Victoria, Australia. The immunisation program in Victoria may be different than other countries, and individuals who have moved...](#)

- [Melissa's story \(video\)](#)

[Melissa shares her story of how her baby caught chickenpox at 5 weeks old...](#)

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[Parents and children talk about some of the factors that can cause a child's asthma to flare up...](#)

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[Children with back pain may grow into adults with chronic bad backs, so it is important to encourage sensible back care...](#)

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[Caring for a crying baby with colic can be stressful, so take some time out to calm down...](#)
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[Cradle cap is not contagious and it is not caused by poor hygiene or bad parenting...](#)
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[Croup is a viral infection of the throat and windpipe that causes noisy breathing, a hoarse voice and a harsh, barking cough...](#)
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[Gastroenteritis or Gastro can be dangerous for very young babies. Gastro is common in young children and spreads easily. Gastro is a bowel infection which causes diarrhoea \(runny or watery poo\) and...](#)
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