

Know the Risks:

Preterm Birth and Low Birth Weight



What are preterm birth and low birth weight?¹

- Preterm birth is defined as a baby born at less than 37 weeks gestation.
- A birth weight of less than 2,500 g (5lbs 8oz) is considered low.
- A birth weight of less than 1,500 g (3lbs 5 oz) is considered very low.
- According to the World Health Organization, every year an estimated 20 million babies are born low birth weight.

What causes low birth weight?

Low birth weight can be caused by several factors, including premature birth and poor fetus growth in the womb (intrauterine growth restrictions).

What are the risk factors for having a preterm or low birth weight baby?

- Poor prenatal care
- Substance abuse
- Anemia in expecting parent
- High blood pressure in expecting parent
- Inadequate weight gain by expecting parent
- Poor nutrition with less protein in expecting parent's diet
- Smoking (by expecting parent and/or family members)
- Previous premature or low birth weight baby

Why does it matter?

Being born premature or low birth weight carries a high risk for mortality and morbidity not only in the infancy period but also later in life.

These babies are likely to experience health complications at birth, such as immature lungs or a harder time eating, gaining weight, staying warm, and fighting infections.

They are also at risk for developmental delays and poor neurological outcomes. Low birth weight can lead to costly health problems such as high blood pressure, diabetes, and high cholesterol when the child grows up.



What can I do to prevent a preterm birth or low birth weight?

- Get regular prenatal check-ups and blood tests before and during pregnancy to ensure your baby is growing as expected.
- Maintain a healthy stress level: Talk about your mood and mental health during your prenatal visits.
- Talk to your provider about healthy exercise and maintain regular activity.
- Take prenatal and iron supplements daily.
- Focus on gaining healthy weight during pregnancy: Eat foods rich in iron and have a well-balanced meal with adequate proteins, green leafy vegetables, lentils, seeds, and nuts (including peanuts). Talk to your doctor about the right diet for you.
- Increase protein and iron content of food by cooking proteins with iron utensils.
- Limit your caffeine intake.
- Avoid substance use of drugs, alcoholic beverages, and smoking: Encourage your family members to quit smoking, as secondhand exposure to smoke can also lead to low birth weight.

Can we predict preterm birth or low birth weight?

Prediction models, like the one below, have been developed to score the risk of preterm birth or low birth weight. If any three factors are positive or the total score is ≥ 30 , then you should speak to your doctor to discuss prevention measures that are best for you.

Risk Factors	Yes/No	Points (if yes)
Smoking (by expecting parent and/or family members)		10
Inadequate weight gain by expecting parent		10
Poor nutrition with less protein in expecting parent's diet		15
Anemia in expecting parent		15
Previous premature baby		15
Previous baby with low birth weight		15
Total points scored		

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5710991/>