

Prematurity

Definition:

An infant is considered premature when born before 37 weeks gestation. Late preterm infants are those born between 35 and 37 weeks.

Description:

Signs of prematurity include:

- Abnormal breathing patterns
- Less body fat
- Lower muscle tone and less activity than full-term infants
- Feeding difficulties due to trouble sucking or coordinating swallowing and breathing
- Soft, flexible ear cartilage
- Thin, smooth, shiny skin that is often transparent (can see veins under skin)
- Body hair
- Enlarged clitoris (in female infants)
- Small scrotum that is smooth and has no ridges, and undescended testicles (in male infants)

Characteristics:

Premature infants are at risk for long-term medical, developmental, or behavioral problems that may continue into childhood or may be permanent. Although the risk of complications increases with a lower birth weight and the more premature the infant is, it is not possible to predict long-term outcomes based on prematurity or birth weight.

Long-term difficulties in premature infants can include:

- [Bronchopulmonary dysplasia](#) (BPD)
- Delayed growth and development
- Mental or physical disability or delay
- Retinopathy of prematurity, vision loss, or blindness

Causes:

A variety of pregnancy-related problems increase the risk of preterm labor or early delivery:

- A weakened cervix that begins to open (dilate) early, also called cervical incompetence
- Birth defects of the uterus
- History of preterm delivery
- Infection (such as a urinary tract infection or infection of the amniotic membrane)
- Poor nutrition right before or during pregnancy
- Preeclampsia — high blood pressure and protein in the urine that develop after the 20th week of pregnancy
- Premature rupture of the membranes ([placenta previa](#))

Implications for speech and language:

Premature birth may result in developmental delays, including speech and language delays. Children with delayed speech and language skills may benefit from early intervention to help develop age-appropriate communication skills. For more information on speech-language delays and prematurity, please see: <http://www.prematurity.org/child/language.html>

Resources:

Books for kids:

- Lafferty, L. (1998). *Born Early: A Premature Baby's Story*. Minneapolis, MN: Fairview Press.
- Murphy-Melas, E. (1996).
- *Watching Bradley Grow: A Story About Premature Birth* Marietta, GA: Longstreet Press .

Books for Parents:

- Harrison, H. (1983). *The Premature Baby Book: A Parents' Guide to Coping and Caring in the First Years*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Klein, A.H., & Ganson, S.A. (1998). *Caring for Your Premature Baby: A Complete Resource for Parents*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers.

Support Groups:

- Online forum and support group <http://www.prematurity.org/>
- Any Baby Can: <http://www.abcaus.org/>
- Easter Seals Central Texas: www.centraltx.easterseals.com

Websites:

- A Primer on Premies <http://kidshealth.org/parent/growth/growing/preemies.html>
- In Spanish: http://kidshealth.org/parent/en_espanol/crecimiento/preemies_esp.html

References:

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Prematurity. (2012, January 24). In *Medscape Reference*. Retrieved from <http://emedicine.medscape.com/article/975909-overview>.

Premature Birth. (2011, November 21). In *CDC Features*. Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/Features/PrematureBirth/>.