

Patient leaflets from the BMJ Group

Premature birth

It's hard for doctors to say who's going to have a premature birth. But if your delivery does start early, there's a lot doctors can do to increase your baby's chances of a healthy start.

What is a premature birth?

Pregnancy normally lasts between 37 and 42 weeks. Having a baby before the 37th week of pregnancy is called a premature birth. You may also hear it called a preterm birth.

What are the symptoms?

Signs that you're going into labour include bleeding from your vagina, cramping pains (contractions), a new pain in your lower back, or your waters breaking (a watery discharge from your vagina). If you go into labour early, you and your baby will need treatment in hospital. Don't delay asking for help.

If your doctor or midwife thinks you may go into labour early, they might suggest a test called a fetal fibronectin test. It's done as a swab from your vagina, and it helps to tell whether you're likely to go into labour soon. It's not suitable for everyone.

What treatments work?

Once you go into labour, there's little anyone can do to stop it. But there are treatments that can help delay the delivery. These treatments allow your baby a little more time to grow. It also allows time for treatment with steroids, which can help to speed up your baby's development.

Treatments to prevent a premature birth

Progesterone is a natural chemical your body makes. It's one of the main female hormones. Taking this hormone may help to prevent you giving birth prematurely. It can be given as an injection or as a tablet you put into your vagina.

In studies, about 26 in 100 women who took progesterone gave birth prematurely. This compared with 36 in 100 women who took a dummy treatment (a placebo). The research didn't find any serious side effects of progesterone. However, there aren't any studies that look at how safe it is in the long term.

If you have a weak cervix (the opening to your womb), doctors can **put in stitches**. This may help stop your cervix opening too early, before contractions start. The research on this treatment is mixed. But, in the best study, women who had cervical stitches were slightly less likely to deliver before 33 weeks than women who didn't. Stitches work best if they're put in early in pregnancy.

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Having an infection caused by bacteria in your vagina can increase your chances of giving birth early. **Antibiotics** can help kill the bacteria. But research found that this doesn't make much difference to your chance of a premature birth.

Doctors used to think that resting in bed late in your pregnancy might help prevent a premature birth. But research now shows that it doesn't help. For some women, it might even make a premature birth more likely.

Treatments to delay delivery

If you go into labour before 34 weeks, your doctor may decide to try to delay delivery. Delaying delivery allows more time for your baby to grow. Drugs called **calcium channel blockers** delay delivery by 'damping down' your contractions. They seem to work better than other drugs and don't cause as many side effects. You take them as tablets.

Drugs called **beta-mimetics** have also been used to try to stop early contractions. But there's been good research that shows they don't work very well. They cause serious side effects, such as chest pain, palpitations, breathlessness, sickness, and a headache. They can also increase your baby's heart rate.

If your waters break before 37 weeks, before labour starts, **antibiotic injections** can delay delivery by up to a week. This buys your baby more time to grow. Antibiotics can also help stop infections getting into your womb and harming your baby. But antibiotics don't work if your waters haven't broken.

Treatments to help protect your baby

If your delivery starts before 34 weeks, your doctor will probably recommend a **steroid injection**. Steroids speed up your baby's development, improving his or her chances of a healthy start. They work best if you have them at least 24 hours before your baby is born. There's good research to show that a steroid injection reduces the chance of your baby dying, having lung disease, or having brain damage. A steroid injection causes few, if any, side effects.

Some doctors think it's safer for early babies to be delivered by **caesarean section**. But there's not enough research to know. Some research suggests that a caesarean section is bad for mothers and doesn't improve the outlook for babies. Your doctor can help you decide whether to plan for a caesarean or a vaginal delivery.

What will happen to my baby?

Babies born after 32 weeks generally do well. They are usually small and may need to stay in hospital a little longer than other babies. But in the long run they do as well as babies born on or near their due date.

Babies born before about 32 weeks may be very small and not properly developed. They may need special care, usually in an incubator. Some need a life support machine to help them breathe. There are some serious health problems that can affect babies born very early, but medical care for premature babies is better than it has ever been.

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