

Lifelong Impacts of Prematurity

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Q: What does it mean to be born preterm, and what complications can these infants face?

Any baby born before the end of 36 weeks of gestation is considered preterm. Preterm birth can occur as early as 22-23 weeks of gestation, which is currently considered the age of viability.

Preterm birth interrupts the development of vital body systems such as the respiratory, gastrointestinal and endocrine systems, which can increase the risk of complications like lung disease, necrotizing enterocolitis and poor growth during the neonatal period. The earlier an infant is born, the less time these systems and organs have to develop. Some organs, such as the lungs, can continue to fully develop after birth. Others, such as the kidneys, will grow but not become more functional.

Q: What health complications can impact adults who were born preterm?

Over the last 20 to 30 years, the ability to care for and treat preterm infants has improved, and survival rates for all but the smallest and earliest of infants have increased to approximately 90 to 95%.

Even still, being born preterm can affect various body systems throughout adulthood. All body systems that did not mature for a full 40 weeks are at risk for dysfunction.

People born prematurely have an increased risk for learning disabilities and behavioral concerns like anxiety or attention deficit disorder.

Adult onset health conditions like chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and cardiometabolic diseases like hypertension or diabetes are also experienced more often and earlier by people born preterm. Additionally, there is a growing body of research that suggests some degree of endocrine dysfunction.

Q: What should parents of premature infants know about their child's future?

Most people born preterm live healthy and active lives. Being born preterm does not set you up for a life of disease. It sets you up for a life of needing to know how to navigate your health.

While there is an increased risk for several health conditions, early intervention and avoidance of additional risks can help. For example, a child who was born early is at risk for mobility and speech delays, so it would be very common for that child to receive physical, occupational and speech therapy. A child who was born early should not be exposed to tobacco smoke.



Q: What should adult healthcare providers know about the impact of prematurity?

Every healthcare provider, regardless of specialty, is treating someone who was born preterm. Asking each patient if they were born preterm can help providers to better anticipate prematurity-related health conditions.

In 2016, the National Institutes of Health called for healthcare providers to incorporate preterm birth history into healthcare decisions. It is time for renewed emphasis on this recommendation. Recognizing and understanding the lifelong health implications of prematurity is essential for the best quality of life for adults born preterm.

Q: What can policymakers do to better support adults born prematurely?

First, a healthy childhood is a way to support a healthy adulthood. Expanding access to developmental support programs like head start and universal access to nutritional support in schools is important. As these children become adolescents and adults, mitigating risk from chronic disease is critical. For example, policies that support reductions in air pollution will ultimately reduce the implications of prematurity-associated adult lung disease.

While preterm birth should be a health diagnosis that follows patients throughout their lives, policymakers must also ensure prematurity is not used as a pre-existing condition to prevent access to healthcare services. This balance is very important.



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NATIONAL COALITION for
Infant Health

The National Coalition for Infant Health is a collaborative of professional, clinical, community and family support organizations.

The coalition focuses on education and advocacy promoting patient-centered care for all infants—whether born preterm or full term—and their families.

infanthealth.org

