High-Risk Infants

Premature or preterm infants (infants who are born before the 37th week of pregnancy) and low-birth-weight infants (infants born at a lower than normal weight—less than 5 pounds, 8 ounces) are at higher risk for a number of medical complications than infants carried to full term and born at a normal weight. One way to reduce the chances of having a baby who may be born preterm or at a lower than normal weight is to take good care of yourself during your pregnancy. Proper prenatal care, which includes regularly scheduled visits to your doctor and proper nutrition, will give your baby a better chance for a healthy start to life.

An article in the October 25, 2000, issue of JAMA discusses the effectiveness of a program that provides comprehensive follow-up care (more extensive than routine follow-up care) to high-risk infants. The infants were considered at high risk because they had a very low weight at birth (less than 3 pounds, 5 ounces) and needed a mechanical ventilator within 48 hours after their birth. The authors found that the group receiving comprehensive follow-up care had fewer life-threatening illnesses, fewer hospital admissions, fewer intensive care admissions, and fewer days in the intensive care unit than the group receiving routine follow-up care.

Increasing the Chances of Having a Healthy Baby:

- Get regular prenatal care (medical care for you and your fetus before you give birth)

At the point that you decide that you want to become pregnant and for the duration of the pregnancy you should:
- Eat a nutritious diet
- Take a vitamin supplement that includes 400 micrograms of folic acid (a B vitamin that plays an important role in the proper development of the fetus, especially of the fetus's nervous system and formation of blood cells)
- Do not smoke and avoid secondhand smoke
- Do not drink any alcohol
- Do not take drugs or supplements unless your doctor approves their use

There are a number of other precautions you should take at the point that you decide that you want to become pregnant and for the duration of your pregnancy. Your prenatal care doctor will inform you of these.


Brian Pace, MA, Writer
Richard M. Glass, MD, Editor