

PROGRESS NEEDED IN PREVENTING PREMATURE BIRTHS

by Hugo D. Ribot, Jr., M.D., F.A.C.O.G.; December 2011

Giving birth is a complex and wonderful process – and fortunately for most women, the outcome is a full-term, healthy baby. Yet today, even with all of our advances in medical technology, more than half a million babies born each year in the United States – 12.2% of all live births or one in eight – are premature. Though the March of Dimes 2011 Premature Birth Report Card shows that preterm birth rates have declined in the past three years, there is obviously still much room for progress and improvement – particularly in Georgia, whose pre-term birth rate continues to exceed the U.S. average.

Prematurity is not only is the leading cause of death among newborns, it also is a serious risk for those who survive. “Preemies,” defined as babies born before 37 weeks of their due date, typically require prolonged and highly specialized care in a neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) for respiratory problems, poor feeding, jaundice and other health problems. Many have lifelong problems with vision and hearing. It also is believed that preterm birth increases the risk of behavioral and developmental problems that can persist into later childhood. Although the more preterm a baby is born, the more severe his or her health problems are likely to be, even babies born just a few weeks early can have more health problems than full-term babies.

The known risk factors for premature birth include:

- Carrying more than one baby (twins, triplets or more).
- Having a previous preterm birth.
- Problems with the uterus or cervix.
- Chronic health problems in the mother, such as high blood pressure and diabetes.
- Certain infections during pregnancy.
- Cigarette smoking, alcohol use and/or illicit drug use during pregnancy.

While premature birth can happen to any pregnant woman – including those who have no known risk factors – all can lower their risk of having a premature baby by following certain healthcare recommendations (see tips below). That includes seeking prenatal care early – as soon as pregnancy is suspected, and continuing it throughout pregnancy. In Georgia and in most other states, access to prenatal care should never be about having health insurance. The vast majority of pregnant women in this and most other states qualify for Medicaid, which is accepted by virtually all ob/gyn providers.

Early prenatal care can identify, reduce or eliminate many medical risk factors that contribute to premature birth. For example, patients with a history of at least one prior premature delivery of unknown cause can reduce the risk of subsequent preterm birth by more than 35% with scheduled injections of progesterone. Early prenatal care also can identify and treat an “incompetent cervix,” a condition that places the patient at risk for preterm delivery. In addition, prenatal care can help to control, as well as prevent, high blood pressure and diabetes. These conditions can be especially problematic during pregnancy, since they not only increase the risk of premature birth, but also pose serious

health risks to the mother. If you smoke, your doctor can additionally provide available options to help you quit this all-around unhealthy habit.

Increased awareness of prematurity risk factors and the importance of prenatal care in reducing those have, no doubt, helped to improve the national preterm birth rate. So have many hospitals and healthcare providers in their implementation of quality improvement initiatives that have reduced the number of medically unnecessary C-sections and labor inductions scheduled before 39 weeks of pregnancy. (The latter, unfortunately, happens far too often simply because of incorrect dating of the pregnancy, or even worse, because the provider caves into pressure from a patient who wants the pregnancy over with or her baby born on a “special” day, such as 11/11/11.)

As an HCA hospital, Cartersville Medical Center has been at the forefront of reducing prematurity in Georgia with its famous Perinatal Safety Initiative, which created several protocols designed to improve patient safety and better outcomes. Since its 2002 inception, this initiative has reduced the hospital’s NICU admissions by 16%.

Top-Ten Tips for Preventing Premature Labor

1. **Seek regular prenatal care.** Schedule a series of prenatal appointments with your ob/gyn as soon as you get a positive result on a pregnancy test. Make sure to request that your ob/gyn perform a thorough history and physical examination at the first prenatal visit. Don’t skip appointments, even if you are feeling healthy and not experiencing any pregnancy complications.
2. **Manage chronic conditions.** Diseases such as diabetes and high blood pressure increase the risk of preterm labor. Work with your health care provider to keep any chronic conditions under control.
3. **Take prenatal vitamins.** Take prenatal vitamins as soon as you get a positive result on a pregnancy test (or as soon as you decide to try to get pregnant). You can purchase the vitamins at any drugstore, grocery store or mass market retailer, but be sure to ask your ob/gyn if (sh)he recommends using a prescription brand.
4. **Eat a healthy diet.** Eat a healthy, balanced diet during pregnancy and, ideally, as soon as you decide to try to conceive. Be sure to balance your carbs and proteins and eat your daily-recommended servings of fruit and vegetables. Eat a variety of vegetables and fruits of different colors to maximize your vitamin and mineral intake.
5. **Watch your weight.** Be sure to stay in the range for recommended weight gain during your pregnancy. Ask your ob/gyn where you fall in the recommended range, which varies depending on if you are overweight or underweight when you get pregnant.
6. **Avoid risky substances.** Avoid ALL alcohol, tobacco and illegal drugs. Also, consult with your doctor on which prescription drugs, and over-the-counter ones, are safe for use in pregnancy. This includes herbal supplements and natural remedies.
7. **Manage stress.** Strive to relax, refresh and rejuvenate whenever possible. Set aside some quiet time every day. Ask for help when you need it.
8. **Follow your ob/gyn’s guidelines for activity.** If you’re at risk of preterm labor or develop signs or symptoms of preterm labor, your health care provider might suggest working fewer hours or spending less time on your feet. Sometimes it makes sense to scale back other physical activities and exercise, too.
9. **Ask your ob/gyn about sex.** If you have a history of preterm labor or experience signs or symptoms of preterm labor, you may need to restrict sexual activity or monitor yourself for contractions after sex.
10. **Take care of your teeth.** Brush and floss daily, and visit your dentist for regular cleanings and dental care. Some studies suggest that gum disease may be associated with preterm labor and premature birth.

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