LONG-TERM HEALTH EFFECTS OF PREMATURE BIRTH

[Premature birth](https://www.marchofdimes.org/complications/premature-babies.aspx) is birth that happens too soon, before 37 weeks. Babies born this early may have more health problems or need to stay in the hospital longer than babies born later. Each year, about 1 in 10 babies in the United States is born prematurely.

Prematurity can cause problems for babies all throughout their lives. The earlier a baby is born, the more likely he is to have health problems. Some of these problems may not show up for several years, even into adulthood. Finding and treating health problems as early as possible — and preventing premature birth overall — can help babies lead longer, healthier lives.

Can premature birth affect a baby’s brain?

Yes. Premature birth can lead to long-term intellectual and developmental disabilities for babies. These are problems with how the brain works. They can cause a person to have trouble or delays in:

* Physical development
* Learning
* Communicating with others
* Getting along with others
* Taking care of himself

Some long-term disabilities caused by premature birth include:

* Behavior problems, including attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (also called ADHD) and anxiety
* Neurological disorders, like [cerebral palsy](https://www.marchofdimes.org/complications/cerebral-palsy.aspx), that affect the brain, spinal cord and nerves throughout the body

Can premature birth affect a baby’s lungs?

Yes. Premature birth can cause a baby to have lung and breathing problems, including:

* Asthma, a health condition that affects the airways and can cause breathing problems
* [Bronchopulmonary dysplasia](https://www.marchofdimes.org/complications/common-conditions-treated-in-the-nicu.aspx) (also called BPD). This is a chronic lung disease that causes the lungs to grow abnormally or to be inflamed. Over time, the lungs usually get better, but a premature baby may have asthma-like symptoms throughout his life.

What other long-term health problems can premature birth cause?

Premature birth can lead to these health problems:

* Intestinal problems, sometimes caused by a disease that affects premature babies called necrotizing enterocolitis (also called NEC). This disease affects a baby’s intestines. Intestines help your body break down (digest) food. While most babies with NEC get better, some may have intestinal problems later in life. For example, scarring may cause the intestine to become blocked. And some babies who’ve had surgery to remove part of the intestine may have trouble later getting nutrients from food.
* Infections. These can include pneumonia (infection of the lungs) and meningitis (infection of the brain).
* Vision problems, like [retinopathy of prematurity](https://www.marchofdimes.org/complications/retinopathy-of-prematurity.aspx) (ROP). Children born prematurely are more likely than children born on time to have vision problems.
* [Hearing loss](https://www.marchofdimes.org/complications/hearing-loss-and-your-baby.aspx), a common birth defect in premature babies. Children born prematurely are more likely to have hearing loss than children born on time.
* Dental problems, including delayed tooth growth, changes in tooth color or teeth that grow crooked or out of place

What kind of services and support are available for your baby?

Talk to your baby’s health care provider about medical services and treatment your baby may need. Depending on your baby’s condition, he may need treatment early on or sometimes not until later in life. The Affordable Care Act  helps make sure that children with special medical needs have the health insurance they need to pay for services and treatment throughout their lives.

Premature babies often need services that help with development and learning:

* Early intervention (also called EI) services are programs for children from birth to age 3 who have disabilities or developmental delays. These programs are usually free and provided by each state. They help children learn physical, thinking, communicating, social and self-help skills that normally develop before age 3. If you think your child may be having trouble with how she plays, learns, speaks or acts, tell your child’s provider. She can refer you to other providers and tell you about services in your state. Or go to the [National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities](http://nichcy.org/state-organization-search-by-state) or to the [Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center](http://www.ectacenter.org/contact/ptccoord.asp) to find out about programs in your state.
* Later on, your baby may need special education services. These are for children with disabilities ages 3 through 21. These services are provided by your school district. Contact your local school district to find out about services they offer.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (also called CDC) program [*Learn the signs, Act early*](http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/concerned.html) offers tools and information for parents who think their child may have developmental delays. The website includes check lists, fact sheets and steps to take if you’re concerned about your child’s development.   
*Last reviewed: October, 2013*