



Health Issues of Premature Babies

Because premature babies are born before they are physically ready to leave the womb, they often have health problems. These newborns have higher rates of disabilities (such as cerebral palsy ([/English/health-issues/conditions/developmental-disabilities/Pages/Cerebral-Palsy.aspx](#))) and even death. African Americans and Native Americans have the highest neonatal death rate associated with prematurity.



Because of these health concerns, premature babies are given extra medical attention and assistance immediately after delivery.

Depending on how early the baby has arrived, your pediatrician or obstetrician may call in a neonatologist ([/English/family-life/health-management/pediatric-specialists/Pages/What-is-a-Neonatologist.aspx](#)) (a pediatrician who specializes in the care of premature or very ill babies) to help determine what, if any, special treatment the infant needs.

Here are some of the most common conditions that occur in premature infants.

Respiratory Distress Syndrome (RDS)

- **What It Is:** RDS is a breathing disorder related to the baby's immature lungs. It occurs because the lungs of preterm babies often lack surfactant, a liquid substance that allows the lungs to remain expanded.
- **Treatment:** Artificial surfactants can be used to treat these babies, along with a ventilator to help them breathe better and maintain adequate oxygen levels in their blood. Sometimes, extremely preterm babies may need long term oxygen treatment and occasionally may go home on supportive oxygen therapy. *See [When Baby Needs Oxygen At Home](#) ([/English/ages-stages/baby/preemie/Pages/When-Baby-Needs-Oxygen-At-Home.aspx](#)) for more information.*

Chronic Lung Disease/Bronchopulmonary Dysplasia (BPD)

- **What It Is:** BPD, or chronic lung disease, is a term used to describe babies who require oxygen for several weeks or months. They tend to outgrow this uncommon condition, which varies in severity, as their lungs grow and mature.

Apnea and Bradycardia

- **What It Is:** Apnea ([/English/ages-stages/baby/sleep/Pages/Sleep-Apnea-Detection.aspx](#)) is a temporary pause (more than fifteen seconds) in breathing that is common in preterm infants. It often is associated with a decline in the heart rate, called bradycardia. A drop in oxygen saturation as measured by a machine called pulse oximetry ([/English/ages-stages/baby/preemie/Pages/Apnea-Monitors.aspx](#)) is called desaturation. Most infants outgrow the condition by the time they leave the hospital for home.

Retinopathy of Prematurity (ROP)

- **What It Is:** ROP is an eye disease in which the retina is not fully developed.
- **Treatment:** Most cases resolve without treatment, although serious cases may need treatment, including laser surgery in the most severe instances. Your infant may be examined by a pediatric ophthalmologist ([/English/family-life/health-management/pediatric-specialists/Pages/What-is-a-Pediatric-ophthalmologist.aspx](#)) or retina specialist to diagnose and, if needed, recommend treatment for this condition.

Jaundice

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- **What It Is:** Jaundice (/English/ages-stages/baby/Pages/jaundice.aspx) happens when a chemical called bilirubin builds up in the baby's blood. As a result, the skin may develop a yellowish color. Jaundice can occur in babies of any race or color.
- **Treatment:** Treating it involves placing the undressed baby under special lights (while her eyes are covered to protect them).

Other Health Problems

Other conditions sometimes seen in preterm babies include anemia (/English/health-issues/conditions/chronic/Pages/Anemia-and-Your-Child.aspx) of prematurity (a low red blood cell count) and heart murmurs (/English/health-issues/conditions/heart/Pages/Heart-Murmur.aspx).

Additional Information on HealthyChildren.org:

- Caring for a Premature Baby: What Parents Need to Know (/English/ages-stages/baby/preemie/Pages/Caring-For-A-Premature-Baby.aspx)
- Going Home with Your Preemie (/English/ages-stages/baby/preemie/Pages/Going-Home-With-Your-Preemie.aspx)
- Watching for Complications (/English/ages-stages/baby/preemie/Pages/Watching-for-Complications.aspx)
- Reducing a Preemie's Risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (/English/ages-stages/baby/preemie/Pages/Reducing-a-Preemies-Risk-of-Sudden-Infant-Death-Syndrome.aspx)

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