

Low Birth Weight

What is low birth weight?

Low birth weight is a term used to describe babies who are born weighing less than 5 pounds, 8 ounces (2,500 grams). An average newborn usually weighs about 8 pounds. A low-birth-weight baby may be healthy even though he or she is small. But a low-birth-weight baby can also have many serious health problems.

What causes low birth weight?

Low birth weight is most often caused by being born too early (premature birth). That means before 37 weeks of pregnancy. A premature baby has less time in the mother's womb (uterus) to grow and gain weight. Much of a baby's weight is gained during the last weeks of pregnancy.

Another cause of low birth weight is a condition called intrauterine growth restriction (IUGR). This occurs when a baby does not grow well during pregnancy. It may be because of problems with the placenta, the mother's health, or the baby's health. Babies can have IUGR and be:

- **Full term.** That means born from 37 to 41 weeks of pregnancy. These babies may be physically mature, but small.
- **Premature.** These babies are both very small and physically immature.

Which babies are at risk for low birth weight?

In addition to premature birth and IUGR, things that affect the pregnant woman can increase the risk of having a low birth weight baby. They include:

- Infection during pregnancy
- Not gaining enough weight during pregnancy
- Previous pregnancy with a low-birth-weight baby

- **Race.** African-American babies are two times more likely to have low birthweight than white babies.
- **Age.** Teen mothers (especially those younger than 15 years old) have a much higher risk of having a baby with low birthweight.
- **Multiple birth.** Multiple birth babies are at increased risk for low birthweight because they often are premature. Over half of twins and other multiples have low birthweight.
- **Mother's health.** Babies of mothers who are exposed to illicit drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes are more likely to have low birthweight. Mothers of lower socioeconomic status are also more likely to have poorer pregnancy nutrition, inadequate prenatal care, and pregnancy complications--all factors that can contribute to low birthweight.

What are the symptoms of low birth weight?

In addition to weighing less than 5 pounds, 8 ounces, babies with low birth weight look much smaller than babies of normal birth weight. A low-birth-weight baby's head may look bigger than the rest of his or her body. He or she often looks thin with little body fat.

How is low birth weight treated?

Treatment will depend on your child's symptoms, age, and general health. It will also depend on how severe the condition is.

Treatment for low birth weight often includes:

- Care in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU)
- Temperature-controlled bed
- Special feedings. Sometimes these are given through a tube into the stomach if a baby cannot suck. Or they are given through an IV (intravenous) line.

How well a baby with low birth weight does depends largely on how much the baby weighs at birth. Babies who weigh less than 1 pound, 1.5 ounces (500 grams) have the most problems and are much less likely to survive.

Low-birth-weight babies typically catch up in physical growth if they have no other complications. Babies may need to have special follow-up healthcare programs.

What are possible complications of low birth weight?

Low-birth-weight babies often have problems. The baby's tiny body is not as strong as a baby of normal birth weight. He or she may have a harder time eating, gaining weight, and fighting infection. Low-birth-weight babies often have a hard time staying warm because they don't have much fat on their bodies.

Babies that are born premature often have complications. It is sometimes hard to tell if the problems are because they were born early, or because they are so small. In general, the lower the birth weight, the greater the risk for complications. Some of the common problems of low-birth-weight babies include:

- Low oxygen levels at birth
- Trouble staying warm
- Trouble feeding and gaining weight
- Infection
- Breathing problems and immature lungs (infant respiratory distress syndrome)
- Nervous system problems, such as bleeding inside the brain (intraventricular hemorrhage)
- Digestive problems, such as serious inflammation of the intestines (necrotizing enterocolitis)
- Sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS)

Babies with very low birth weight are at risk for long-term complications and disability. Long-term complications may include:

- Cerebral palsy
- Blindness
- Deafness
- Developmental delay

Can low birth weight be prevented?

More babies are surviving even though they are born early and are very small. This is because of advances in the care of sick and premature babies. But preventing preterm births is 1 of the best ways to prevent babies born with low birth weight.

Regular prenatal care is the best way to prevent preterm births and low-birth-weight babies. At prenatal visits, the healthcare provider will check the health of you and your baby. It is important to:

- **Follow a healthy diet during pregnancy.** This will help you to gain enough weight to help your baby grow and help you stay healthy.
- **Not drink alcohol, smoke, or use drugs.** All of these can cause low birth weight and other problems for your baby.