

Risk Factors for Preterm Labor*

Poor nutrition or inadequate hydration

Insufficient omega-3 fatty acids in the diet

Physical trauma, abuse (25 percent of pregnant women suffer domestic violence)

Hard physical labor, tiring travel, standing all day at work

African American ethnicity

Substance abuse — tobacco, alcohol, street drugs

Emotional stress and fear (no partner, unplanned pregnancy, separation or divorce, recent move, geographic and cultural isolation, chronic illness in family, recent death)

Financial stress, unemployment, inadequate housing

Fear of increased body size by term

Fear of birthing two or more babies

Previous preterm delivery

History of preterm labor in the maternal line (for example, mother was preterm herself; preterm birth may be a pattern for several generations)

Low pre-pregnancy weight

*Studies have shown that the mother at highest risk for preterm labor is a black, single teenager who has not completed high school.

Chronic cough (risk of preterm rupture of membranes)

Obesity or underweight

Placental problems — placental abruption, placenta previa, mid-pregnancy vaginal bleeding

TPEH (toxemia/preeclampsia/eclampsia/HELLP)

Infection in the genital tract (mycoplasma, ureaplasma, chlamydia, and other sexually transmitted diseases); severe kidney and urinary tract infections

Congenital anomalies (gastroschisis), congenital heart disease or defect

Fibroids (benign uterine tumors)

Chromosomal anomalies (for example, Down's syndrome)

Uterine anomalies, cervical incompetence

DES exposure

Diabetes mellitus

Oligohydramnios or polyhydramnios (insufficient or excessive amniotic fluid)

Exposure to ionizing radiation (x-rays), anesthetic gases, lead

Motor vehicle accident or other injury

Severe gum disease

Two or more second-trimester abortions

Signs of Preterm Labor That You May Not Recognize

1. Contractions occurring at regular intervals of 15 minutes or less, about 4 or more per hour. The uterus tightens, becomes hard, and peaks — takes a globular shape. Such contractions may cause no discomfort.
2. Menstrual-like cramps, rhythmic or constant, experienced in your lower abdomen.
3. Rhythmic or persistent pressure that may radiate to your thighs.
4. An intuitive feeling that something is wrong.
5. Gas pains, intestinal discomfort, diarrhea.
6. Vaginal discharge of water, mucus, blood.
7. Lower backache, whether it comes and goes or is continuous. It may radiate to your sides or front.