

November is Prematurity Awareness Month

By Stephanie Sosnowski

In the United States, nearly one in every eight babies born arrives too soon. Preterm birth, when a baby born before the gestation period of 37 weeks, is the leading cause of infant death. When babies do survive, they may suffer with serious healthcare issues for a lifetime. Problems facing babies born prematurely include breathing problems, cerebral palsy, and mental retardation, among others.

Babies need all the time possible in-utero to continue growing all of the organs that will be needed to sustain them once they are born. Your baby's brain does much of its growth in the last few weeks of gestation, meaning that your baby's brain at 35 weeks of gestation weighs only two-thirds of what it will weigh at 39 weeks. This is very important to understand, particularly if you are thinking about scheduling your baby's arrival for non-medical reasons, for example, you need to get back to work or school or that you are just tired of being pregnant!

If there are no medical indications for your baby's birth to be scheduled, waiting until 39 weeks allows your baby's lungs and liver to get all the time they need to develop fully. Waiting until 39 weeks also means that your child is less likely to have problems with his vision and hearing after birth. Your baby also has more time to grow and gain more weight – babies born at a healthy weight will have an easier time staying warm! Babies born before 39 weeks can sometimes have a hard time sucking and swallowing and staying awake long enough to eat after being born.

While organizations like the March of Dimes continue to fund research to find out what causes preterm labor, there are things that families can do to help lower their risk of having a baby born too soon.

The best way is to plan your pregnancy. This means that if you are thinking about starting a family, you should begin with a visit to your health care provider for a general check up. If you don't have health insurance, contact MISN – and if you are eligible, we can help you enroll in free or low-cost health insurance. Your health care provider can make recommendations for immunizations, whether you need to lose or gain some weight, check your blood pressure and monitor for diabetes. Visiting the dentist is a good idea, too, as poor oral health, especially periodontal disease, has also been linked with premature birth.

If you are pregnant already, be aware of the warning signs of preterm labor:

- Contractions: your abdomen tightens like a fist every 10 minutes or more often
- Change in vaginal discharge like leaking fluid or bleeding from your vagina
- Pelvic pressure—the feeling that your baby is pushing down
- Low, dull backache
- Cramps that feel like your period
- Abdominal cramps with or without diarrhea

If you experience any of these symptoms, call your healthcare provider immediately.

MISN offers comprehensive childbirth and parenting preparation courses in Orange, Sullivan and Ulster Counties – visit our website at www.misn-ny.org or call us at 800-453-4666 for a schedule of classes.

Stephanie Sosnowski is the Deputy Director of Maternal-Infant Services Network (MISN) of Orange, Sullivan and Ulster Counties, a not-for-profit organization that coordinates health and human services for pregnant women and children.