



This handout gives information that *may* help reduce your risk of having another preterm birth if you delivered due to preterm labor.

Wait 1 Year

After having a spontaneous preterm birth

A preterm birth can happen even when you do everything right during pregnancy. Please know that we may or may not be able to find the reason for your preterm birth. We do know that if you have one preterm birth, you have a greater risk of having another one in a future pregnancy.

But, there are some things you can do that *may* help reduce the chances of having another preterm birth. They include:

- Using birth control for 1 year before trying to get pregnant again
- Taking *folic acid* (also called *folate*) for 1 year before getting pregnant again
- Caring for your teeth
- Reducing your stress level
- Not smoking
- Planning care for a future pregnancy

Birth Control

Wait at least 1 year before getting pregnant again. This will greatly improve your chance for a full-term delivery next time.

Part of waiting at least 1 year includes having a birth control plan:

- Make a plan with your partner and health care provider.
- Choose a reliable method of birth control. Use it the right way every time.
- Plan ahead to get refills or other supplies so you have them when you need them.
- You may want to use 2 birth control methods to be safe. Some couples use a condom and another method.
- If you are not satisfied with your birth control method, see your health care provider right away. Use a back-up method of birth control until you can make a new plan.

Folic Acid

Folic acid helps prevent preterm birth. Women can reduce their risk of having a preterm birth by taking folic acid every day **before** they become pregnant again.

- Take folic acid **for 1 year** before you become pregnant again. Take at least 400 micrograms (mcg) of folic acid every day. Taking prenatal vitamins or a multivitamin with folic acid every day will meet your nutritional needs.
- If you get pregnant again, keep taking folic acid.
- Also eat foods that contain folic acid – they are part of a healthy diet. Medium to high amounts of folic acid are in these foods:
 - Fruits: oranges, strawberries, cantaloupe, and others
 - Vegetables: broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, okra, asparagus, spinach, Brussels sprouts, and others
 - Leafy greens: Romaine lettuce, collard greens, and others
 - Enriched breads, pasta, and cereals
 - Many kinds of legumes, including peanuts, black beans, lentils, kidney beans, and others

Dental Health

See your dentist **right away** if you have any signs of gum disease. These signs include:

- Gums that are swollen, red, or bleeding
- Sensitive teeth
- Bad breath that will not go away

There is a link between gum disease and preterm birth. Take care of your teeth and gums. Take care of dental problems **before** you become pregnant again.

- Get dental checkups every 6 months to find, treat, and prevent gum disease.
- Brush your teeth at least 2 times a day.
- Floss every night.

Coping with Stress

The links between stress and health are well-known. To help prevent a preterm birth in the future, it is important to know what causes your stress and to find ways to cope with it.

Everyone feels stress from time to time. Having a preterm birth can add to these feelings. We understand that you and your family may be going through a difficult time right now.

Some sources of your stress may have been there before you became pregnant, such as:

- Anxiety or depression
- Problems with family members
- Problems with your partner
- Money concerns

You may also have stress that is caused by fatigue and mood changes that occur from lack of sleep and changes in your hormones after giving birth.

Reducing Stress

One place to start reducing your stress level is by asking yourself these questions:

- What are the usual stresses in my life?
- What is causing more stress right now?
- What have I done in the past to help reduce my stress?
- What is not helping reduce my stress right now?

Your health care provider may be able to help you lower your stress by looking at what causes it and helping you figure out healthy ways to cope with it. Even small steps toward lowering stress can help.

The time before you get pregnant again is a good time to learn what causes your stress and to practice healthy ways of coping with it. And, once you know what causes your stress, you can try to find practical solutions and emotional sources of support.

Please see our handout, “Stress After a Preterm Birth,” for more tips on how to lower your stress.

Smoking

Smoking and being around people who are smoking is harmful to you and your family. Stay away from places where you might be exposed to smoke.

If You Smoke

- Keep in mind that if you decide to become pregnant again:
 - Smoking can increase your risk for another preterm birth.
 - Smoking cuts down on the amount of oxygen that your unborn baby receives.
 - Smokers often have babies that weigh less, are sick more often, and have more health problems in general.
- Protect your future unborn baby by quitting smoking. The best time to quit is **before** you become pregnant again. It is never too late to quit. If you are not able to stop completely, try to cut down.
- If you are worried about gaining weight or have other concerns about what will happen when you quit smoking, talk with your health care provider.
- Your child is less likely to grow up to be a smoker if you do not smoke when you are pregnant.

Planning Care for a Future Pregnancy

Meeting with a Perinatologist After a Preterm Birth

Many women who have delivered a preterm baby want to talk with a health care provider who can help them understand why their baby came early. A *perinatologist* (also called a *maternal fetal medicine specialist*) is a doctor who cares for women who have higher-than-normal risks for problems in pregnancy. This includes women who have had a preterm birth who may wish to become pregnant again.

It is important to meet with a perinatologist if you think you might want to have another baby in the future. This doctor may be able to find the reason your baby came early. Some of those reasons might be:

- Premature uterine contractions
- An infection
- A weakened cervix

If your perinatologist can find the reason your baby was born early, they will be able to recommend specific things you can do to improve the chance that you will have a longer pregnancy in the future.

But, sometimes even a specialist cannot find a reason why you delivered preterm. If this is true for you, your doctor will still be able to advise you on what to do to improve the outcome of a future pregnancy.

Note: We realize that you are probably not thinking about a future pregnancy at this difficult time. But it is very important to meet with a perinatologist if you think you might want to become pregnant in the future.

Follow-up Care Visits

Regular 6-week Follow-up

We recommend that every woman who has delivered a preterm baby visit a pregnancy care provider 6 weeks after giving birth. At this visit, the provider will make sure your body has fully recovered from the pregnancy and delivery. We strongly encourage you to make this appointment. It can be with either your regular pregnancy care provider or with a perinatologist.

Planning for Future Pregnancies

If you think you might want to have another baby someday but cannot see a perinatologist within 6 weeks after delivery, make sure you have a “pre-pregnancy” or “preconception” appointment with a perinatologist **before** you get pregnant again. Check with your health care insurance provider to see if this appointment is covered by your insurance plan.

The perinatologist will:

- Review your overall health
- Review your medical records from your preterm delivery
- Talk with you about what happened in your previous pregnancy and preterm birth
- Advise you about the care you will need for the best outcome of another pregnancy

Depending on your health care needs, your perinatologist may recommend these things in a future pregnancy:

- More frequent pregnancy care visits
- Frequent measurements of your cervix to see if your cervix is beginning to shorten or open
- *Cerclage*, a procedure to keep your cervix closed
- Progesterone therapy

