

Improving Infant Health

A Low Birthweight Prevention Initiative
May 2016 Volume 7



Can Stress Cause Preterm Labor?

The beginning of labor is a complex process that is not fully understood. Multiple hormones and body systems in both mother and baby are involved, and predicting when labor will start is very difficult. Because labor is complicated and hard to study, scientists can't say for sure that stress causes [preterm labor](#). But there is an association. In other words, studies show that mothers who experience more stress are *more likely* to go into labor early, so stress increases a mother's risk of premature labor.

During stressful situations, the body reacts in a number of ways. For instance, heart rate and blood pressure increase, and hormones flood the body. And it's important to realize that stress can be either acute or chronic.

- With [acute stress](#), the body's reaction is temporary and short-lived. Afterward, the body returns to its normal state.
- With [chronic stress](#), whatever is bothering you is ongoing or recurs. As a result, the body never returns to its normal state.

Acute stress does not increase the chances that a mother will go into preterm labor. If you have, say, an occasional argument with your baby's father or have trouble paying the bills sometimes, you're not at higher risk.

However, the changes that chronic stress makes to the body are what doctors think might contribute to preterm labor.

Chronic stress causes long-term changes to the body's vascular system, hormone levels, and ability to fight infection. These changes could all potentially influence labor to start before the baby is full-term (at least 37 weeks gestation). For example, dealing with a divorce, the death of a loved one, long-term unemployment, or anxiety related to your pregnancy could all cause the kind of chronic stress that increases your risk for preterm labor.

How Can I Reduce My Stress During Pregnancy?

There are a few things that you can do to lower stress during pregnancy (and these are also excellent ideas if you're *not* pregnant!). More research needs to be done into exactly which relaxation strategies will help decrease the risk of preterm birth, but anything that reduces chronic stress could possibly increase your chances of having a term baby.

- **Counseling:** In one small study, researchers found that mothers with chronic stress who received psychological [counseling](#) during their pregnancies were less likely to deliver early.
- **Exercise:** Exercise can help relieve stress, but make sure you talk to your doctor before starting an exercise program, because some types (such as high-impact workouts) may be too risky during pregnancy. [Yoga](#) has been shown to improve pregnancy outcomes and reduce the risk of preterm birth, and is generally safe to do while pregnant, but talk to your physician. He or she will likely tell you to avoid certain moves, such as those done while lying on your back or stomach. Other low-impact activities that are usually recommended include brisk walking, swimming, stationary cycling, and using an elliptical or stair-climber.
- **Alternative therapies:** [Massage](#), [aromatherapy](#), [acupuncture](#), and [hypnotherapy](#) have been shown to help to reduce stress. (Though note that no studies have shown whether they reduce the risk of preterm birth, specifically.)



Important numbers to know:



District 4 Public Health (770) 358-1483

WIC Call Center 1-866-636-7942

Georgia Quit line 1-877-270-STOP

Save the Date

West Central Georgia Community Transformation Collective

July 15, 10 AM – 2 PM –Newnan location TBD

For more information, call 678-764-6297 or contact your local Family Connection Coordinator

Stewards of Children Training

July 30, 9AM – 11AM – Greenville, location TBD

For more information, call 706-672-4016 or contact Jennifer Corcione, Meriwether Family Connection Coordinator

Georgia Family Connection 25th Anniversary Conference

October 12-14, Jekyll Island

For more information, www.gafcp.org

For more information on the **Low Birthweight Initiative**
in your community, please contact:

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For more information about Georgia's Low Birthweight Initiative go to
www.gafcp.org/count/LBW

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