

Low Birth Weight: What you need to know

Low Birth Weight: an Information Guide for Parents

What is low birth weight?

Babies who are born too small weigh less than 2500 grams (5½ pounds). This is called low birth weight.

Why does low birth weight happen?

- It happens if a baby is born too soon (*preterm birth*).
- It happens if a baby does not grow enough while the mother is pregnant.

Why is it a problem?

- All children need a good start in life. That is why we try to prevent low birth weight.

What can a pregnant woman do?

- Eat food that is good for you.
- Stop smoking and stay away from people who smoke (*second-hand smoke*).
- Learn how to deal with stress.

Why do some pregnant women have low birth weight babies?

It can happen if you:

- Are not eating food that is good for you and the baby.
- Feel a lot of stress.
- Live in poverty.
- Do not have good support from family and friends.
- Smoke cigarettes or are exposed to second-hand smoke.
- Are pregnant with twins or triplets.
- Have a job where you stand up for a long time.

How does having low birth weight affect the baby, the family and the community?

- Low birth weight is the main reason babies get sick or die during the first year of life.
- Some low birth weight babies can have health problems for the rest of their lives.



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- These babies are more likely to have problems learning or seeing. It can affect the way they grow in the first 5 years. They may not be ready for school when it is time to start.
- A family with a low birth weight baby must cope with stress about the baby's future.
- Caring for a child who has health problems causes stress and can cost a lot of money for both the family and the community.

What can we do to prevent low birth weight?

- Everyone in our community can help.

If you are pregnant:

- Learn the facts about low birth weight and how to prevent it.
- Find ways to reduce stress in your life.
- Ask your neighbours, family or friends to help you with your children and with work you do at home.
- Take time to sit and relax. Cleaning the house can wait.
- Visit your doctor or midwife for regular check-ups.
- Learn about *preterm labour* (when a woman begins labour before it is time for the baby to be born). Find out what you can do if this happens.
- It is not easy to know if you are having preterm labour. Some important signs to watch for (especially if they are **new** or **different**) include:
 - Fluid suddenly comes out of your vagina
 - Fluid slowly comes out of your vagina
 - Blood comes out of your vagina
 - You feel cramps (such as when you are menstruating)

If you think you are in labour, GO TO THE HOSPITAL right away- preferably the hospital where you will be giving birth.

If you are the husband of a pregnant woman:

- Learn the facts about low birth weight and how to prevent it.
- Learn about preterm labour (going into labour too early). Find out what you can do if this happens.



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- Give extra help and support to your wife when she is pregnant.
- Try to reduce stress in her life.
- Take care of your other children while she rests.
- Spend time together as a couple. For example, you can invite her to go for a walk.
- Remind her to visit the doctor or midwife for regular check-ups.
- Go to these kinds of appointments with her.

Do not smoke around pregnant women. Second-hand smoke can hurt both the mother and baby.

If you are a friend or colleague:

- Offer to help with work in the home, like cooking a meal.
- Let her know that you want to help.
- Invite her to go for a walk, or some other gentle activity she enjoys.
- Offer to take care of the other children.
- **Do not to smoke** around a pregnant woman. Second hand smoke hurts both the mother and baby.

Learn about preterm labour (going into labour too early). Find out what you can do if this happens.

Learning the facts about low birth weight

Some people think that:

It is good to have a small baby because big babies make birth more difficult.

The fact is:

Labour is NOT easier with a small baby. It can also be very hard to give birth to a low weight baby.



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The prevention of low birth weight has been a collaborative effort in Ottawa for over a decade. In 1995, The Ottawa Coalition for the Prevention of Low Birth Weight (formerly the Community Coalition for the Prevention of Low Birth Weight) was formed to increase awareness about low birth weight.

For more information about low birth weight:

- **Talk to your health care provider.**
- Call the City of Ottawa Public Health Info Line at **613-580-6744**
- Visit the Ottawa Coalition for the Prevention of Low Birth Weight Website at www.lbwinfo.ca.

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