Information for a Multiples Pregnancy

As an expectant parent of multiples, your pregnancy experience is unique, and you probably have a lot of questions. This brief guide is intended to offer you basic information, but it will be especially important to talk to your healthcare provider about your specific situation.

Facts About Multiples

Twins account for approximately one in 30 births. One third of twins will be identical, which means they will have the exact same genetic makeup because they were formed by one egg and one sperm. Fraternal twins result when two eggs are fertilized, and they are no more alike than any other sibling pair. Fraternal twins are increased by factors such as the mother's age, use of fertility drugs, and heredity. The only completely accurate way to determine if twins are identical or fraternal is by amniocentesis or a DNA blood test after birth.

Today’s trends in advanced fertility treatments and later-life childbearing have caused the rate of higher order multiples (having three or more babies in the womb at once) to dramatically increase, currently accounting for nearly 150 of every 100,000 births.

A Healthy Multiples Pregnancy

It is important to remember that carrying more than one baby places extra demands on you both physically and emotionally, and the guidelines can differ from a singleton pregnancy (being pregnant with just one baby). So it’s helpful to choose a healthcare provider who is experienced with multiples pregnancies.

GUIDELINES FOR A MULTIPLES PREGNANCY:

- You will need to gain 38-55 pounds for a twin pregnancy, and add 10 more pounds for each additional baby in higher order multiples, but follow your healthcare provider's advice
- Your weight gain should occur earlier than in a singleton pregnancy (a good guideline is 24 pounds by 24 weeks)
- You'll need a minimum of 2,700 calories each day for a twin pregnancy and 300 more calories than this per baby for high order multiples (for example, you’d need 3,000 calories each day for triplets) (Note: Protein intake is especially important when you’re carrying multiples!)
- Prenatal vitamins with additional iron may be recommended by your healthcare provider
- Try to exercise for 30 minutes every day (ask your healthcare provider if you need to modify your regular exercise routine)
- Try to rest for 30 minutes three times a day
- Many of the discomforts you’ll experience are very similar to a singleton pregnancy and are treated the same way—but they usually occur sooner and with more intensity
- It will be very important to share your emotions with your family and friends during your pregnancy and start to find resources for help once the babies are born

Fetal Health Tests

It's common for a multiples pregnancy to have more testing to ensure the health of the mother and babies.

- Fetal movement counts involve counting your babies’ movements during a specific period of time each day to evaluate their well-being. You should feel five or more movements per baby in one hour. If you don’t, try moving around and eating something, and if you still notice a definite change or decrease in fetal movement, contact your healthcare provider.
- Ultrasounds will be used to see the babies’ bodies, internal organ development, placentas, and amniotic sacs to evaluate the health of the pregnancy.
- Nonstress Tests (NST) are used during the second half of pregnancy to check the babies’ hearts rates and movements with an electronic fetal monitor if there are any questions about their well-being.
- Biophysical Profile (BPP) is a test that combines an ultrasound and nonstress test to check for fetal breathing movements, amniotic fluid volume, fetal movement, and muscle tone to assess their well-being later in pregnancy.
Potential Complications

While many women have a healthy multiples pregnancy, there are generally more risks associated with a multiples pregnancy.

**COMMON COMPLICATIONS FOR MULTIPLES:**

- **Preterm Birth** is when a baby is born before completing 37 weeks of pregnancy, and it's the most common complication with multiples. Never ignore contractions (even those that are painless), and if you have more than four in one hour, call your provider. Preterm labor can often be treated with medications and close uterine monitoring, which allows your baby to spend more valuable time developing inside of you. Talk to your healthcare provider about other warning signs of preterm labor.

- **Fetal Growth Restriction** is when a baby's growth slows down in the womb. It's natural for a multiples baby to have slower growth in the last two months of pregnancy. But if a baby's growth slows too much, it can lead to lower birth weight and related complications. Therefore, ultrasound exams will be used to monitor your babies' growth patterns. If one of your babies is not getting the necessary nutrients, your healthcare provider will discuss your options, which might include closer management of your diet or health, bed rest, or early delivery.

- **Placental problems** (including a “low” or “early separated” placenta) can reduce the nutrients and oxygen to the babies and cause bleeding in the mother. Always notify your health care provider with any vaginal bleeding, which can be a sign of a placental problem. Your healthcare provider might suggest close monitoring, rest, or early delivery to treat the problem.

- **Twin to twin transfusion** is a condition that can occur if multiples share a placenta, and it occurs in 15% of all identical twin pregnancies. It can result in one baby becoming significantly smaller than the other one. This complication is monitored using an ultrasound and a blood flow Doppler test, and your healthcare provider will discuss your treatment options.

Labor and Delivery

Like any expectant parent, you might feel excited and scared as your due date approaches. Consider taking a childbirth class for parents of multiples, and talk to your healthcare provider about any other concerns you might have. Your healthcare provider will help you determine the best delivery plan for your babies. One consideration will be their position in the womb. Regardless of the type of birth you have, you should be prepared for a large number of medical staff being present at your birth.

- **Cesarean Birth:** Usually if the first baby is not positioned head down, or if there are triplets or more, a cesarean birth will be advised. With planned cesareans, most women remain fully awake under regional anesthesia, and the babies are delivered within minutes of each other. Keep in mind that cesarean birth usually involves a longer hospital stay and postpartum recovery compared to vaginal birth.

- **Vaginal Birth:** Vaginal birth is usually an option if you’re having twins and the first baby is positioned head-down. In the case of a vaginal delivery, most of the same options and interventions will be available to you as would be with a singleton birth. Often there is additional fetal monitoring, and sometimes moms are moved to an operating room for pushing and birth. Usually the second twin will be born within 20 minutes after the first.

- **Premature Birth:** Despite everyone’s best efforts, many multiples are born early and with low birth weights.
In fact, more than half of multiples are born before 37 weeks of pregnancy. A twin’s average birth weight is 5 ¼ pounds, and a triplet’s average birth weight is 3 ¾ pounds. The most common problems associated with premature and low-birth weight babies are breathing troubles, inability to fight infection and stay warm, and feeding issues. To treat these problems, multiples typically need to spend some time in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) to receive the most advanced medical care possible. Most hospitals with a NICU will provide a one-on-one tour for parents expecting multiples, so be sure to ask about it during pregnancy.

**Life with Multiples**

Parents of multiples often report that there is an amazing amount of joy as they witness the relationship between their children flourish. However, having multiples presents special challenges, especially during the early months.

**TIPS FOR COPING AFTER BIRTH:**

- After a multiples delivery, mothers may have more complications during recovery. The most common issues involve the shrinking of the uterus and extra bleeding. Prepare for extra help at home to assure you can take care of your own health.

- If your babies have to spend time in the NICU, talk to your nurse about the benefits of pumping your breast milk.

- Breastfeeding can offer great health and financial benefits when you have multiples. Make sure that you receive education about breastfeeding and contact information for lactation resources in your area during pregnancy.

- If your babies must stay in the hospital for an extended stay, try to create a balance between being there and getting rest so you are able to care for them when they do come home.

- Put work and household responsibilities on hold for as long as possible.

- Enlist the help of family, friends, postpartum doulas, and support agencies to provide care, equipment, and financial assistance as needed.

- Multiples may have an increased risk of illness. Insist that visitors are well and use safety precautions, including basic hand washing.

- Take shifts caring for the babies to assure you and your partner get some much needed rest, and try to feed your babies at similar times— especially at night time.

- To help tell your babies apart, color code their clothes, have them wear special bracelets, or paint one of their finger or toe nails a distinct color.

**National Resources**

- **Sidelines**: [www.sidelines.org](http://www.sidelines.org)

- **Mothers of Multiples Clubs**: [www.multiplesofamerica.org](http://www.multiplesofamerica.org)

- **American Academy of Pediatrics**: [www.healthychildren.org](http://www.healthychildren.org)