

Too small too soon

Information for parents of babies born early around 20 to 21 weeks

You have been given this information because the doctors think that you may have your baby very soon. You and your family need to know what is likely to happen for your baby if this occurs.

A normal pregnancy lasts for about 40 weeks. Babies born after only 20 to 21 weeks are so small and fragile that they sadly do not survive. Their lungs, heart and brain are not ready for them to live outside the womb.

Patient Information Booklet

What are my baby's chances of survival if he or she comes now?

Babies born earlier than 22 weeks are not currently able to survive even if doctors try to save them. (This also sometimes applies to some babies who are born after 22 weeks, but are at “extremely high risk” from intensive treatment.

Because there is a high chance that intensive treatment for babies born this early will do more harm than good, doctors do not attempt artificial life support.

It is important to talk with your doctors. They will give you specific information about your own situation.

What are my options?

The best thing would be if your baby does not come now and stays in the womb. Even a few days may improve the baby's chances of survival. If your baby does come in the next day or two doctors would recommend that we provide him or her with 'comfort care'.

Comfort care

Comfort care is special care for babies whose time is precious but short. It means providing treatments that will make their time as comfortable as possible.

Doctors would avoid treatments that cannot help the baby and might cause them pain or discomfort. They may recommend pain relief if they appear uncomfortable. However, often simple things like making the baby dry and warm, and holding them close are enough.

How your baby might look

Babies born this early often weigh less than half a kilogram (1 small packet of sugar). Their skin is shiny, and thin, and covered with fine hair. Sometimes babies can be quite bruised from birth. Their eyes may not be able to open. The baby's colour is often purple or blue because of low oxygen levels.

What happens when my baby is born?

When your baby is born doctors and midwives will be there to look after you and your baby.

Some babies born this early die during labour or delivery. The stress of the birth is too much for them. If this happens your baby would be carefully dried and wrapped and (if you would like this) given to you to hold.

Some babies born this early live for a short time. The baby may breathe and have a heartbeat. As part of comfort care they would be dried and wrapped and given to you to hold. The baby's breathing may be fast or slow. They may have pauses (breaks) in their breathing, and may take deep infrequent breaths (gasps). This is part of the dying process and does not mean the baby is in pain.

How long do babies live?

It is very hard to know how long you would have with your baby. On average babies born between 20-21 weeks who receive comfort care live for about one hour, but it might be shorter or longer for your baby. Babies do not usually appear to be in pain or uncomfortable, but if they were there are treatments that can help.

What if my baby doesn't come now?

If your baby does not come in the next day or two their chances may improve. Depending on when your baby comes and how they might respond to treatment, there may be different options for your baby.

You can talk with your doctor about those options when the time comes.

For more information

You can talk to your doctor, midwife or nurse any time you have questions. These services may also be able to help:

BLISS

Premature baby charity

<http://www.bliss.org.uk/>

Telephone: 0500 618140

SSNAP

Support for the Sick Newborn and Parent (Oxford charity)

<http://www.ssnap.org.uk/>

Telephone: 01865 221359

SANDS

Stillbirth and neonatal death charity

<https://www.uk-sands.org/>

Telephone 020 7436 5881

Patient Information Booklet compiled by:

Prof Dominic Wilkinson

Consultant Neonatologist

Oxford University Hospitals NHS Trust