

Preterm birth outcomes in WA

A baby born before 37 weeks has not had enough time to fully develop. The baby's survival chances depend on how early the baby is born and how much they weigh.

The survival chances for preterm babies have been increasing, especially for those born extremely early.

About 80 out of 100 babies born at 24 weeks at King Edward Memorial Hospital (16 weeks early) and admitted to the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) survive.

For babies born at 30 weeks gestation (10 weeks early) about 98 out of 100 babies survive.

A baby born prematurely will need extra care. Most preterm babies will need to be cared for away from their mother's bedside in either a special care nursery or, if the baby is more sick, in the NICU.

Common problems include the baby becoming cold more easily, having breathing problems, being unable to suck their feeds as would a full-term baby and being more vulnerable to infections.

Preterm babies can go home once they can suck their feeds well, are gaining weight and have recovered from any problems they may have had. For most babies this happens around the time when they should have been born (the mother's expected due date).

Breastfeeding is the best feed for premature babies. In the beginning most premature babies are not strong enough to suck directly from their mother's breast. As a result, the mother will express milk regularly and this milk will be given to their baby through a feeding tube. Most mothers who intend to breastfeed their baby are able to do so as their baby becomes stronger.

Long-term outcomes for babies born early depend on many factors, one of which is how early the baby is born and their birth weight.

Most babies born preterm go on to lead normal, healthy lives.



Dr Mary Sharp

Some babies, however, face challenges ranging from speech delay or learning difficulties in school through to more complex issues.

The risk of challenges increases the earlier the age at which the baby is born.

At King Edward Memorial Hospital there is a follow-up program throughout the early years for those born very early to monitor their progress.

Dr Mary Sharp

Consultant Neonatologist,
Head Neonatology Clinical Care Unit,
King Edward Memorial Hospital

Forever grateful

Four years ago, Christine Botha was undergoing a routine pregnancy anomaly scan when the doctor broke the devastating news that they couldn't find a heartbeat. Her baby boy Samson Gregory Botha was born at 21 weeks and despite all of the tests no cause of death was found.

"They couldn't find anything wrong medically, which is good in a way, but scary for the next pregnancy," she said.

"Therefore my second pregnancy was monitored so carefully and my GP referred me to the Preterm Birth Prevention Clinic.

"Because I was induced so early with the first pregnancy, you have a one in three chance of delivering early again, even if nothing is wrong."

Naturally, both Christine and her husband were extremely anxious going into the second pregnancy.

"The clinic understood our history and took it seriously," she said.

"They truly cared and went above and

New initiative saving lives across WA

The Western Australian Preterm Birth Prevention Initiative is a world-unique program with the single goal of safely lowering the rate of preterm birth in the state.

This program is built on new clinical guidelines that have resulted from research conducted in Perth and elsewhere, an outreach program reaching out to all health care practitioners in our State who are involved in caring for pregnant

women, an online public health campaign for women and their families and a dedicated new clinic at King Edward Memorial Hospital.

During 2015, the Initiative's Outreach Team ran workshops in hospitals across WA, from Kununurra in the north to Albany in the south.

Travelling 13,000 km over the year, more than 500 health care practitioners attended workshops and lectures.

The Outreach Team consists of two obstetricians, a senior ultrasonographer and midwives with special expertise in this field.

Support for this program has been provided by The Women and Infants Research Foundation (WIRF), Channel 7 Trust and the McCusker Charitable Foundation.

The online public health program for women and their families can be found at www.thewholeninemonths.com.au.

In both 2013 and 2015, the Initiative was a finalist in the Orange Seed Competition, which is a joint collaboration between West Australian Newspapers and Jack-In-The-Box advertising company based in Busselton.

As a result the public health campaign will now receive additional support and you can expect to see special health messages on preterm birth prevention in The West Australian during this year.

A new dedicated Preterm Birth Prevention Clinic was launched at King Edward Memorial Hospital in November 2014 and was funded by the Minister for Health, Director General of Health and Chief Medical Officer through a block grant to the Hospital.

This clinic provides management plans for women at very high-risk of preterm birth and typically refers women back to their usual health care provider once the high-risk period is over.

Multidisciplinary team members include obstetricians, ultrasonographers, a psychologist and midwives.

Progress of the Initiative across the state is being closely monitored through the many existing computer-based systems.

This ongoing assessment will enable the team to confirm the effectiveness of the various clinical strategies and to adjust guidelines to ensure the program can be as successful as possible.

The Western Australian Preterm Birth Prevention Initiative Chair and Founder Professor John Newnham said the Initiative had been made possible by medical research but there was still much to learn.

"Our state is known worldwide for being a leader in scientific discovery in this field, led by The University of Western Australia's School of Women's and Infants' Health and the Women and Infants Research Foundation," he said.

"There are many pathways to preterm birth and our research programs are diversified to help us discover new strategies for as many of these pathways as possible.

"The Western Australian Preterm Birth Prevention Initiative is now a unique feature of our state's medical practice and research.

"We are all part of the team - whether we are health care practitioners, pregnant women or members of their families.

"Together, we have a major opportunity to save young lives and prevent lifelong disability for many of our future children."

