

## About the Issue: Elective Delivery Prior to 39 Weeks of Gestation

Between 1990 and 2006, the United States saw a 50% increase in deliveries at 37 to 38 weeks of gestation.<sup>1</sup> During that period, the rise in rates for elective inductions outpaced those for medically indicated induction.<sup>2</sup> In a healthy pregnancy, allowing the baby to remain in the womb at least 39 weeks is safest for both baby and mother. Non-medically indicated deliveries between 37 and 39 weeks of gestation pose increased health risks for both mother and baby.

### Key Messages

- Studies show that long- and short-term adverse outcomes may be avoided if a healthy pregnancy is allowed to continue until at least 39 weeks of gestation.
- Clinical evidence shows that a fetus goes through a significant amount of development and growth in several key organ systems between 37 and 39 weeks of gestation.
- Infants born prior to 39 weeks face a 20% greater risk of significant medical consequences.
- If mother and baby are healthy, wait to deliver until at least 39 weeks of gestation.

### Critical Development Between Weeks 37 and 39

- Critical development of the brain, lungs, and liver occurs between 37 and 39 weeks.<sup>3</sup>
- A baby's brain doubles in size between 35 and 39 weeks.

### Risks to Baby

- Babies delivered before 39 weeks are at greater risk of being admitted into the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU).<sup>4</sup> They have a 20% greater risk of complications after birth than do babies born after 39 weeks. These complications include:
  - Breathing, feeding, and temperature problems
  - Sepsis<sup>5</sup>
  - Cerebral palsy<sup>6</sup>
- Babies born before 39 weeks have a 5% greater risk of having developmental disabilities.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Martin, J. A., Hamilton, B. E., Ventura, S. J., et al. (2012). Births: Final data for 2010. *National Vital Statistics Reports*, 6(1). Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics.

<sup>2</sup> Zhang, X., Joseph, K.S., & Kramer, M.S. (2010). Decreased term and postterm birthweight in the United States: impact of labor induction. *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology*, 203, 124, e1-7.G.

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.marchofdimes.com/pregnancy/getready\\_atleast39weeks.html](http://www.marchofdimes.com/pregnancy/getready_atleast39weeks.html)

<sup>4</sup> National Child and Maternal Health Education Program (NCMHEP). (no date). National Child and Maternal Health Education Program (NCMHEP) continuing medical education (CME) course: Raising awareness: Late preterm birth and non-medically indicated inductions prior to 39 weeks. Accessed April 19, 2013, from [http://www.nichd.nih.gov/ncmhep/focus/toolkit/Documents/CME\\_One\\_Pager.pdf](http://www.nichd.nih.gov/ncmhep/focus/toolkit/Documents/CME_One_Pager.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> <http://dss.mo.gov/mhd/oversight/pdf/121113-early-elective-delivery.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> NCMHEP CME, *op. cit.*

- Babies born between 37 and 38 weeks have a 50% greater chance of death within the first year of life than do babies born between 39 and 41 weeks.<sup>8</sup>

## Risks to Mother

- Elective early delivery increases the mother's risk of:
  - Postpartum depression<sup>9</sup>
  - Stronger and more frequent contractions<sup>10</sup>
  - The need for a cesarean delivery, which carries its own risks, including<sup>11</sup>
    - Increased risk of negative health outcomes for the baby<sup>12</sup>
    - Longer recovery time (weeks rather than days)<sup>13</sup>
    - Risks associated with major surgery, including infection<sup>14</sup>
    - Increased chance that future pregnancies will require cesarean delivery<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> NCMHEP CME, *op. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.leapfroggroup.org/media/file/ACOGRethinkingDefinitionofTermPregnancy.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> NCMHEP CME, *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.marchofdimes.com/pregnancy/getready\\_atleast39weeks.html](http://www.marchofdimes.com/pregnancy/getready_atleast39weeks.html)

<sup>11</sup> NCMHEP CME, *op. cit.*

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.marchofdimes.com/pregnancy/getready\\_atleast39weeks.html](http://www.marchofdimes.com/pregnancy/getready_atleast39weeks.html)

<sup>13</sup> [http://www.marchofdimes.com/pregnancy/getready\\_atleast39weeks.html](http://www.marchofdimes.com/pregnancy/getready_atleast39weeks.html)

<sup>14</sup> NCMHEP CME, *op. cit.*

<sup>15</sup> [http://www.marchofdimes.com/pregnancy/getready\\_atleast39weeks.html](http://www.marchofdimes.com/pregnancy/getready_atleast39weeks.html)