

## Twin pregnancy: What multiples mean for mom

Are you surprised to learn that you're carrying twins — or triplets? It happens to about three in every 100 pregnant women. And that number is on the rise.

### What's driving the twin pregnancy trend?

Many women are delaying pregnancy well into their 30s and beyond — when age-related hormonal changes may cause more than one egg to be released at a time. This boosts the odds of conceiving non-identical (fraternal) twins.

Because of their decreased fertility, older women also are more likely to use assisted reproductive technologies — such as in vitro fertilization — to conceive. Since these procedures typically involve implanting more than one fertilized egg in the uterus, they're more likely to result in twins or other multiples.

### How multiples are made

Fraternal twins — the most common kind — occur when two separate eggs are fertilized by two different sperm. Each twin has his or her own placenta and amniotic sac. The twins can be two girls, two boys or a boy and a girl. Genetically, they're no more alike than any other siblings.

Identical twins occur when a single fertilized egg splits and develops into two fetuses. Identical twins may share a placenta, but each baby usually has a separate amniotic sac. Genetically, the two babies are identical. They'll be the same sex and look exactly alike. Triplets and other higher order multiples can be identical, fraternal or a combination of both. But these births are rare.

### Making the diagnosis

Typically, a twin pregnancy is diagnosed before delivery. The first clue is often a uterus that's larger than normal or more than one fetal heartbeat. Certain blood tests may suggest twins or other multiples as well.

A suspected twin pregnancy is often confirmed with an ultrasound. During this exam, sound waves are used to create images of your uterus and baby — or babies.

Sometimes a seemingly normal twin pregnancy is later found to have only one baby. Such an episode can be heartbreaking, frustrating and confusing — and experts aren't sure why it happens.

### What twin pregnancy means for mom

Taking good care of yourself is the best way to take care of your babies. Here's what to expect:

- **More side effects.** Carrying multiples may intensify common pregnancy complaints, such as nausea, vomiting, heartburn, insomnia and fatigue. Abdominal pain, shortness of breath and pressure on the pubic bone are common as well.

- **More frequent checkups and ultrasound exams.** You'll see your health care provider often to track your babies' growth and development, monitor your health and watch for signs of preterm labor. This may mean every-other-week visits during the second trimester and once-a-week visits during the third trimester.
- **More emphasis on certain nutrients.** You'll need more folic acid, calcium, iron, protein and other essential nutrients. If you're already eating healthfully, keep it up, and be sure to take a daily prenatal vitamin. Your health care provider may recommend an iron supplement as well.
- **More weight gain.** Gaining the right amount of weight can support your babies' health — and make it easier to shed the extra pounds after delivery. For twins, the recommendation is often 35 to 45 pounds. This may take up to 2,700 calories a day. Work with your health care provider to determine what's right for you.
- **More precautions.** Your health care provider may ask you to limit some of your activities — such as work, travel and exercise — as your pregnancy progresses.

### Consider complications

Healthy multiples are born every day. But it's important to be aware of possible complications. For example:

- **Pre-term labour:** Most pregnancies last 38 to 42 weeks. For a twin pregnancy, 37 to 39 weeks is optimal. Pre-term labour refers to contractions that begin to open the cervix before week 37. Sometimes pre-term labour can be stopped with fluids, rest or medication.
- **Pre-term birth:** If pre-term labour can't be stopped, your babies may be born too early — the most common problem for multiples. You may be given injections of a steroid medication to speed your babies' lung development. Even then, the smallest preemies may fight to survive. Complications may include low birth weight, breathing and digestive difficulties, underdeveloped organs, learning disabilities and developmental problems.
- **High blood pressure:** Mothers of multiples are more likely to develop high blood pressure during pregnancy. By reducing blood flow to the uterus, this condition — known as preeclampsia — may deprive the babies of oxygen and nutrients.
- **Twin-to-twin transfusion:** With identical twins, it's possible for a blood vessel in the placenta to connect the babies' circulatory systems — causing one baby to receive too much blood and the other too little. Often, babies in this situation are delivered as soon as the benefits of early birth outweigh the potential problems of prematurity.
- **Caesarean birth:** About 50 percent of women carrying twins deliver their babies by C-section — especially if the babies aren't in a head-down position. C-sections are generally considered safer for triplets and higher order multiples.
- **Bleeding after delivery:** The risk of excessive bleeding after delivery increases with a larger placenta or multiple placentas. Your health care provider will be prepared to help with medications or other interventions if needed.

### Caring for multiples

Healthy multiples have the same needs as other newborns. You, however, may need more rest and support than you imagined. Take time to enjoy your babies — and ask friends,