

Pregnancy

From conception to birth, the development of your baby is a truly amazing process. Understanding the different stages of prenatal maturation will help you appreciate the miracle of new life and the changes a woman's body will experience.

Fertilization and Implantation

During fertilization, a single male sperm, competing against millions of other sperm, penetrates a female egg to create a one-cell embryo. Their union brings together 46 chromosomes to complete the baby's genetic makeup.

The single cell in the fertilized egg soon divides into two cells. The number of cells continues to double every 12 hours. The egg travels down the fallopian tubes to implant itself on the wall of the uterus, where it grows and receives nourishment throughout the pregnancy.

The average time from fertilization to birth is roughly 266 days. Doctors prefer pregnancies to go "full term" (280 days, or 40 weeks) so that the baby can develop fully and adapt easier to life outside of the womb.

During this time, a mother's uterus expands as the baby grows. More blood is produced to accommodate her body and the baby. Extra hormones are secreted, causing mood swings and cravings. The average mother gains between 20 and 30 pounds during pregnancy.

Pregnant patients are advised to see their doctors every four to six weeks during the first seven months, twice during the eighth month, and then weekly thereafter.

The medical team performs regular tests during these visits, including:

- Measuring of the mother's weight and blood pressure
- Urine checks
- Feeling of the abdomen
- Listening to the baby's heart rate
- Ultrasound examinations.

Prenatal Development

First Trimester (one to 12 weeks):

- **After the first month:** The nourishing placenta surrounding the baby expands. The spinal cord and several vertebrae start to develop. The head and intestinal tract begin to take shape. The tiny heart begins beating. The baby measures about a quarter-inch long. Normal symptoms a mother may experience include:
 - Morning sickness
 - Nausea and vomiting
 - Breast tenderness and enlargement
 - Stomach and bladder pressure
 - Fatigue
 - Frequent urination
 - Heartburn

- Food cravings and aversions
 - Mood swings
 - Weight gain
- **Second month:** The brain grows larger. Facial features, fingers, toes, eyes and ears begin to develop, as does the placenta. The chest and abdomen are fully formed, and the lungs are growing. Sex organs begin to appear. The baby measures about 1 inch long and weighs less than 1 ounce. Normal symptoms a mother may experience include:
 - Morning sickness
 - Nausea and vomiting
 - Breast tenderness and enlargement
 - Stomach and bladder pressure
 - Fatigue
 - Frequent urination
 - Gas and bloating
 - Heartburn
 - Food cravings and aversions
 - Mood swings
 - Weight gain
 - **Third month:** Facial features become more defined. The heart now has four chambers and beats at 120 to 160 beats per minute. The baby can open and close its hands and mouth, which now has 20 buds, which will later become teeth. The baby measures about 3 to 4 inches long, weighs about 1 ounce and has transformed from an embryo into a fetus. Normal symptoms a mother may experience include:
 - Increased appearance of bluish veins
 - Morning sickness
 - Nausea and vomiting
 - Breast tenderness and enlargement
 - Stomach and bladder pressure
 - Fatigue
 - Frequent urination
 - Gas and bloating
 - Heartburn
 - Food cravings and aversions
 - Mood swings
 - Weight gain.

Second Trimester (13 to 28 weeks):

- **Fourth month:** Placenta and sex organs are fully formed, and the gender can be determined through tests. The heartbeat can be heard through a stethoscope. The fetus can move its toes, kick and hear your voice. Eyebrows, eyelashes, eyelids, hair and nails appear. The baby's skin color is more opaque than transparent. The umbilical cord continues to grow and thicken to carry enough blood and nourishment. The baby measures between 6 and 8 inches long and weighs nearly 6 ounces. Normal symptoms a mother may experience include:
 - Fatigue
 - Heartburn
 - Indigestion
 - Gas and bloating
 - Constipation
 - Vaginal discharge
 - Bleeding gums
 - Breast tenderness
 - Enlarged abdomen
 - Slight sensations of baby movement (also called "quickenings")

- Frequent urination
 - Hemorrhoids
 - Mild ankle and feet swelling
 - Mood swings
 - Weight gain
 - Decrease in morning sickness
- **Fifth month:** The fetus is able to turn from side to side and head over heels. The baby now wakes and sleeps at regular intervals. Head hair develops. The baby measures around 10 inches long and weighs roughly 1 pound. Normal symptoms a mother may experience include:
 - Fatigue
 - Heartburn
 - Indigestion
 - Gas and bloating
 - Constipation
 - Vaginal discharge
 - Bleeding gums
 - Headaches
 - Faintness or dizziness
 - Increased heart rate
 - Ear stuffiness
 - Nasal congestion
 - Breast tenderness
 - Nipple and areola darkening as breasts prepare for lactation
 - Enlarged abdomen
 - More baby kicking
 - Frequent urination
 - Hemorrhoids
 - Varicose veins
 - Mild ankle and feet swelling
 - Leg cramps
 - Weight gain
 - Increased and deeper respiration
 - Decreased mood swings
- **Sixth month:** Essential organs have been formed. Fat deposits beneath the red, wrinkly, soft, hair-covered skin. The baby measures about 12 inches long and weighs between 1 and 2 pounds. Normal symptoms a mother may experience:
 - Baby kicks
 - Abdominal aches
 - Exterior abdominal itchiness
 - Increased appetite
 - Vaginal discharge
 - Headaches
 - Faintness or dizziness
 - Heartburn
 - Indigestion
 - Gas and bloating
 - Ear stuffiness
 - Nasal congestion
 - Leg cramps
 - Backaches
 - Weight gain.

Third Trimester (29 to 40 weeks):

- **Seventh month:** The baby is covered with vernix, a thick, white protective coating. Its eyes can open, and it can stretch its arms and legs and change position from side to side. The baby can suck its thumb and cry and respond to sound and light. The baby can probably survive if born at the seventh month. The baby measures about 15 inches long and weighs between 2 to 2 1/2 pounds. Normal symptoms a mother may experience:
 - Baby kicks
 - Abdominal aches
 - Exterior abdominal itchiness
 - Difficulty sleeping
 - Shortness of breath
 - Large appetite
 - Vaginal discharge
 - Headaches
 - Faintness or dizziness
 - Heartburn
 - Indigestion
 - Gas and bloating
 - Ear stuffiness
 - Nasal congestion
 - Leg cramps
 - Backaches
 - Weight gain
 - Sporadic Braxton Hicks contractions
 - Larger breasts that leak colostrum (early milk)
- **Eighth month:** The baby kicks more. The brain grows rapidly, and body fat reserves increase. A male's testicles descend into the scrotum. The baby changes position in the uterus and usually maintains this position until birth. Lungs may still be immature, but the head bones are soft and flexible to allow for an easier fit through the birth canal. Chance of survival if born at eight months is very high if the infant receives the right care. Baby measures 15 to 18 inches long and weighs between 4 and 5 pounds. Normal symptoms a mother may experience:
 - Difficulty sleeping
 - Shortness of breath
 - Large appetite
 - Increased vaginal discharge
 - Headaches
 - Faintness or dizziness
 - Heartburn
 - Indigestion
 - Gas and bloating
 - Protruding navel
 - Ear stuffiness
 - Nasal congestion
 - Leg cramps
 - Backaches
 - Weight gain
 - Scattered Braxton Hicks contractions
 - Leaky breasts
- **Ninth month:** Skin is less wrinkly and may lose its vernix covering. Lungs are mature. The baby will usually "drop" (settle head down and further into the mother's pelvis). The baby will gain half a pound a week during its last prenatal month. A full-term baby usually measures between 18 and 20 inches long and weighs between 6 and 9 pounds, on average. Normal symptoms a mother may experience include:
 - Stronger routine fetal movements
 - Abdominal aches

- Exterior abdominal itchiness
- Difficulty sleeping
- Less discomfort and easier breathing after baby "drops"
- Large appetite
- Increased need to urinate
- Increased vaginal discharge
- Buttock and pelvic discomfort
- Headaches
- Faintness or dizziness
- Heartburn
- Indigestion
- Gas and bloating
- Protruding navel
- Ear stuffiness
- Nasal congestion
- Leg cramps
- Backaches
- Weight gain
- More frequent Braxton Hicks contractions
- Leaky breasts
- Bursts of energy
- Rapid fatigue
- Excitability
- Impatience
- Irritability.

Visit the doctor regularly during pregnancy, and contact your physician immediately if you suspect that anything is wrong. Consider taking a birthing or "Lamaze" class with your partner to learn how to prepare for delivery and care for your infant.

Resources

- American College of Nurse-Midwives: www.midwife.org
- The American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists: www.acog.org
- U.S. National Library of Medicine: www.nlm.nih.gov
- WomensHealth.gov: www.womenshealth.gov

Many pregnancy care procedures are fully covered under health insurance plans. Visit HealthCare.gov for a comprehensive list: <https://www.healthcare.gov/preventive-care-women/>

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