

Understanding Stillbirth: Causes, Support, and Resources



Highlights

Stillbirth refers to the birth of a baby who has died after 20 weeks of pregnancy.

The cause of stillbirth is often unknown, but several factors can increase the risk.

There are steps that can be taken to reduce the risk of stillbirth.

The death of a baby is a deeply distressing experience, and grieving is a normal response.

Support is crucial for parents and families dealing with stillbirth.

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Understanding Stillbirth

Stillbirth is the birth of a baby who has died after 20 weeks of pregnancy. The death may have occurred during the pregnancy itself, or, in rarer cases, during the process of birth. If the exact duration of the pregnancy is uncertain, the birth is still considered a stillbirth if the baby weighs 400 grams or more. A miscarriage, on the other hand, refers to a pregnancy loss that happens before the 20th week.

Experiencing stillbirth is a traumatic and emotional event for families. While it is often not possible to determine the cause of stillbirth, support services are available to help parents cope with their grief and loss.

Causes of Stillbirth

The exact cause of stillbirth remains unknown in many cases. However, several factors may increase the risk, which can be related to the baby's health, the mother's health, or complications during pregnancy or birth. These include:

Congenital Abnormalities: These may include genetic conditions or heart defects that were not detected during pregnancy.

Premature Birth: Babies born too early may not be fully developed, which can result in stillbirth.

Maternal Health Issues: Conditions like diabetes, high blood pressure, pre-eclampsia, or infections can increase the risk of stillbirth.

Placental Problems: Conditions like placental abruption or placenta praevia can disrupt the oxygen and nutrient supply to the baby, leading to stillbirth.

Complications During Birth: Issues arising during the labor process may also increase the risk of stillbirth.

Infections: Some infections, particularly those affecting the placenta or amniotic fluid, can raise the likelihood of stillbirth.

Umbilical Cord or Placenta Issues: Problems like cord accidents or compression may reduce oxygen supply to the baby.

Trauma: Physical trauma to the mother's abdomen can sometimes cause stillbirth.

Although we cannot always predict or prevent stillbirth, attending regular prenatal check-ups and monitoring the health of both mother and baby are key steps in detecting and addressing potential complications early.

Reducing the Risk of Stillbirth

While it is not always possible to prevent stillbirth, there are steps that expectant mothers can take to reduce the risk:

Avoid Smoking: Smoking during pregnancy significantly increases the risk of stillbirth. Quitting smoking at any stage of pregnancy can improve both the mother's and baby's health.

Attend Antenatal Appointments: Regular check-ups with your healthcare provider can help track the baby's development and identify any potential risks.

Monitor Baby's Movements: Pay attention to any changes in your baby's movements, particularly during the third trimester. A decrease or absence of movement should be reported to your healthcare provider immediately.

Sleep on Your Left Side: Studies have shown that sleeping on the left side helps improve blood flow to the uterus, which may reduce the risk of stillbirth.

Manage Medical Conditions: If you have conditions like diabetes or high blood pressure, it's crucial to work closely with your healthcare team to manage them during pregnancy.

While these actions may help lower the risk of stillbirth, they cannot guarantee that it won't happen. Nevertheless, maintaining a healthy lifestyle and staying in close contact with your healthcare team can help improve pregnancy outcomes.

When to Seek Medical Help

It is important to contact your healthcare provider immediately if you experience any of the following symptoms:

You believe your baby has stopped moving or is moving less than usual.

You experience severe abdominal pain or cramping.

You sustain a blow to your abdomen.

You notice abnormal bleeding or an increase in vaginal discharge.

You experience dizziness, blurred vision, or severe headaches.

You have swelling in your face, hands, or feet, or painful swelling in your legs.

You experience severe nausea and vomiting that prevents you from eating or drinking.

You develop itching, especially on your palms or soles of your feet.

You experience fever or chills.

If you are unable to contact your healthcare provider, seek medical attention at the nearest emergency department or call emergency services.

Diagnosing Stillbirth

Stillbirth is typically diagnosed when the baby's heart stops beating, which can be detected using ultrasound. If there is no heartbeat or signs of life, your healthcare provider will inform you of the diagnosis and offer support as you process this devastating news.

Delivery After Stillbirth

After stillbirth, the mother must deliver the baby. This is a difficult and painful experience for parents. Most often, doctors recommend inducing labor for a vaginal birth, as this generally carries fewer long-term physical and emotional effects compared to a cesarean section. However, the method of delivery will depend on factors such as the mother's health, the baby's size, and personal preferences.

It's important to discuss with your healthcare team your preferences for the birth process. They will take into account your emotional well-being and any concerns you may have.

Seeing Your Baby After Birth

Many parents find comfort in spending time with their baby after the birth.

This allows them to process their grief and say goodbye. You may choose to hold your baby, bathe them, dress them, or even take photographs or videos if you wish. If you have not yet named your baby, this can be a meaningful time to do

so.

If you feel uncertain about seeing your baby, your healthcare team will offer guidance and support. There is no rush to make a decision, and you can change your mind later. If you decide not to see your baby, you may request photographs to keep as a memory.

Honoring Your Baby

During this difficult time, some parents choose to keep mementos or create memorials to remember their baby. Hospitals may offer various options, including:

- A lock of the baby's hair
- The baby's name card
- Handprints and footprints
- An identification bracelet
- A memory box

Writing a letter or keeping a journal can also help you process your grief and keep your baby's memory alive.

Additional Decisions to Make

After stillbirth, parents often face additional decisions, such as planning memorial services or arranging burial or cremation. Your healthcare provider can assist with these decisions, offering information and support in line with your personal, cultural, or spiritual preferences.

Grieving the Loss of Your Baby

The grief following a stillbirth is deeply personal. Parents may experience a wide range of emotions, including sadness, anger, and emptiness. It's important to remember that there is no "right" way to grieve, and everyone reacts differently. Seeking support from healthcare professionals, family members, or support groups can help you navigate this painful time.

Your Body and Future Pregnancy

After stillbirth, your body will go through natural changes as part of the recovery process, including bleeding, breast changes, and emotional challenges. Allow yourself time to heal both physically and emotionally. If you are considering a future pregnancy, it's important to consult with your doctor to ensure your body is ready and to address any health concerns.

Tools And Assistance

If you've experienced stillbirth, several resources are available to help you through this difficult time:

Bereavement Midwives: Specialized professionals who offer support through the delivery process and assist with emotional needs afterward.

Counseling and Therapy: Professional support to help you manage grief and emotions, available through individual or group sessions.

Parent Support Groups: Groups where you can connect with other parents who have gone through similar experiences.

Memorial Services: Services to create keepsakes like handprints, footprints, or personalized memory boxes to help with grieving.

Spiritual Support: Chaplains or religious leaders can provide comfort based on personal beliefs.

Legal and Medical Support: Assistance with the registration of birth and death, and guidance through medical procedures.

Financial Support: Organizations may offer financial help for funeral costs or other expenses.

Follow-up Care: Post-birth check-ups and counseling to support your recovery and any future pregnancies.