

Greenwich Hospital

What is Anemia of Prematurity?

PATIENT/FAMILY INFORMATION SHEET

What is Anemia of Prematurity?

Anemia is a very common condition in premature babies due to a decrease in the number of circulating red blood cells (RBCs). RBCs contain hemoglobin which carries oxygen to each cell of the body.

Why do premature babies get anemic?

Premature babies become anemic from one or more of the following:

- Blood loss before and/or during delivery
- A tight umbilical cord around the baby's neck
- A shorter life span of red blood cells compared to that of an adult
- A mismatch of the baby's and the mother's blood types
- An inability to make enough red blood cells to keep up with the baby's rapid growth rate
- The need to take blood samples from the baby to perform necessary laboratory tests

How do the doctors know if my baby has anemia?

One or more of the following signs may indicate anemia in a baby:

- Pale color to skin
- A fast rate of breathing or difficulty in breathing when at rest
- Decreased activity or too sleepy
- Tachycardia (high heart rate) when at rest
- Tiredness with feeding or poor feeding habits
- Slow weight gain
- Lab test results that show a decreased number of red blood cells and decreased hemoglobin levels

How is anemia treated?

Treatment of anemia depends on the severity of the condition and baby's symptoms or the amount of hemoglobin in the blood. Treatment options may include:

- Erythropoietin in combination with iron supplements. This is a drug similar to the substance the body normally produces to increase the number of red blood cells. It works slowly over a few weeks.
- If rapid treatment is necessary, blood transfusions may be ordered to increase the red blood cell count more quickly.
- Later, as the baby grows, he may need an additional source of iron. This may be an iron fortified formula, vitamins with iron, or iron drops. Iron is needed by the body to make red blood cells.

Who can donate blood if a transfusion is needed?

Mothers who have recently given birth are not considered for blood donation because they have already lost blood with the delivery of the baby.

Blood for a baby must be from someone with a compatible blood type and it must pass several screening processes. If you are interested in finding out if you, a friend, or a relative are an acceptable donor, let your baby's doctor know. Your doctor will then give you the necessary information.

How many blood transfusions will my baby need?

The number of transfusions ordered depends on how anemic your baby is. Premature babies are more susceptible to anemia and therefore may require several transfusions over the course of their hospitalization.

Sources: Nemour's Foundation. Retrieved March 2006 from www.kidshealth.org
March of Dimes. Retrieved March 2006 from www.marchofdimes.org
American Academy of Pediatrics. Retrieved March 2006 from <http://www.aap.org>

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