

Multiple
pregnancy:
when it's twins
or more

Twins happen about once in every hundred births. You're more likely to have them if:

- you or your partner have identical twins in your family
- you're over 35 years of age
- you're having fertility treatment.

Identical twins happen when one fertilised egg splits into two separate cells. Each cell then develops into a baby. Because they have come from the same egg, the babies have the same genes. They are the same sex and they look very much alike. Identical twins are likely to share one placenta but have separate cords.

Non-identical (fraternal) twins happen when two separate eggs are fertilised by two sperm. They look like each other in the same way that brothers and sisters do. Each twin has its own placenta. Non-identical twins can be different sexes.

Triplets are rare and quads (four babies) rarer still, although the use of fertility drugs means multiple births are more common than they once were.

What are the signs that I may be carrying more than one baby?

Fast weight gain or a uterus that is larger than usual for your particular stage of pregnancy might indicate a multiple pregnancy. An extra baby can also mean that the normal discomforts of pregnancy, like nausea or more frequent trips to the toilet, are more severe. An ultrasound around 10 or 18 weeks can confirm a multiple pregnancy.

There is a small risk of miscarriage of one twin early in pregnancy.

What's different about a multiple pregnancy?

The prospect of twins can be exciting, but a multiple pregnancy also carries an increased risk of complications. These include:

- anaemia
- premature birth
- one or both babies not growing well.

This means that regular antenatal visits are really important – good care will help reduce the risk of problems. It is particularly important to identify twins that share a single placenta. This type of multiple pregnancy carries the highest risk to the babies and needs careful monitoring.

It's best to be in a hospital that has the facilities you need as more than half of women with multiple pregnancies go into labour early. Speak to your midwife or doctor to make sure that your hospital has the services needed for multiple births.

Most women with multiple pregnancies can give birth normally, but you may need a caesarean section operation or labour induction if there are complications. It's recommended that the babies be carefully monitored in pregnancy and labour. This may include using electronic fetal monitoring.

You may also be in hospital a little longer after giving birth – the babies may be premature, or you may need more time to get used to feeding and caring for more than one baby.

Knowing that you're having more than one baby may also make you more anxious. You may worry about complications, and how you'll cope with two or more babies. The extra fatigue and discomfort of carrying more than one baby can make things harder if you're feeling anxious or down.

Don't keep these feelings to yourself. Talk to your doctor, midwife, hospital social worker or a counsellor.

For more information visit Australian Multiple Birth Association www.amba.org.au