

OB-GYN Practice

High-Risk Pregnancy

What is a high-risk pregnancy?

All pregnancies carry risks. The definition of a “high-risk” pregnancy is any pregnancy that carries increased health risks for the pregnant woman, foetus or both.. People with high-risk pregnancies may need extra care before, during and after they give birth. This helps to reduce the possibility of complications.

However, having a pregnancy that's considered high risk doesn't mean you or your foetus will have problems. Many people experience healthy pregnancies and normal labour and delivery despite having special health needs.

How common is high-risk pregnancy?

About 50,000 people in the U.S. experience severe pregnancy complications each year. Overall, Black people are about three times more likely to die from pregnancy-related complications than white people.

What are common medical risk factors for a high-risk pregnancy?

Patients with many pre-existing conditions have increased health risks during pregnancy. Some of these conditions include:

- Autoimmune diseases, such as lupus or multiple sclerosis (MS).
- COVID-19.
- Diabetes.
- Fibroids.
- High blood pressure.
- HIV/AIDS.
- Kidney disease.
- Low body weight (BMI of less than 18.5).
- Mental health disorders, such as depression.
- Obesity.
- Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS).
- Thyroid disease.
- Blood clotting disorders.

Pregnancy-related health conditions that can pose risks to the pregnant woman and foetus include:

- Birth defects or genetic conditions in the foetus.
- Poor growth in the foetus.
- Gestational diabetes.

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- Multiple gestation (pregnancy with more than one foetus, such as twins or triplets).
- Preeclampsia and eclampsia.
- Previous preterm labour or birth, or other complications with previous pregnancies.

What are the potential complications of high-risk pregnancy?

A high-risk pregnancy can be life-threatening for the pregnant person or foetus. Serious complications can include:

- Preeclampsia (high blood pressure from pregnancy).
- Eclampsia (seizure from pregnancy).
- Preterm delivery.
- Caesarean delivery (C-section).
- Excessive bleeding during labour and delivery, or after birth.
- Low or high birth weight.
- Birth defects.
- Problems with the foetus's brain development.
- Neonatal intensive care unit admission for your baby.
- Intensive care unit admission for you.
- Miscarriage.
- Stillbirth.

How is high-risk pregnancy diagnosed and monitored?

Getting early and thorough prenatal care is critical. It's the best way to detect and diagnose a high-risk pregnancy. Be sure to tell your Obstetrician about your health history and any past pregnancies. If you do have a high-risk pregnancy, you may need special monitoring throughout your pregnancy.

Tests to monitor your health and the health of the foetus may include:

- Blood and urine testing to check for genetic conditions or certain congenital conditions (birth defects).
- Ultrasonography, which uses sound waves to create images of the foetus to screen for congenital conditions.
- Monitoring to ensure the foetus is getting enough oxygen, such as a biophysical profile, which monitors their breathing, movements and amniotic fluid using ultrasound, and a non-stress test, which monitors their heart rate.

How is high-risk pregnancy managed?

Management for a high-risk pregnancy will depend on your specific risk factors. Your care plan may include:

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- Closer follow-up with your obstetrician.
- Consultation with other medical specialists.
- More ultrasounds and closer foetal evaluation.
- Careful monitoring of medications used to manage pre-existing conditions.

If your health or the health of the foetus is in danger, your Obstetrician may recommend labour induction or a C-section.

How can I prevent a high-risk pregnancy?

You can reduce your risk of pregnancy complications by:

- Avoiding drugs and alcohol.
- Identifying potential health risks before getting pregnant. Tell your doctor about your familial and personal medical history.
- Maintaining a healthy body weight before pregnancy.
- Managing any pre-existing health conditions you may have.
- Making sure any long-term medications are safe to take during pregnancy.
- Quitting smoking.
- Planning pregnancies between the ages of 18 and 34.
- Practicing safe sex.

What's the prognosis (long term after pregnancy) for people with high-risk pregnancy?

Many people who have high-risk pregnancies don't experience any problems and deliver healthy babies. But they may be at a higher risk for health problems in the future, including:

- Complications during future pregnancies.
- Postpartum depression.
- High blood pressure.
- Cardiovascular disease.
- Type 2 diabetes.
- Stroke.

Some high-risk pregnancies can increase a child's risk of:

- Behavioral problems.
- Breathing disorders.
- Gastrointestinal diseases.
- Growth and developmental delays.
- Mental health conditions.

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- Neurological disorders.
- Obesity and diabetes.
- Vision, hearing or dental problems.