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Familias, Pediatras y Adolescentes en la Red. Mejores padres, mejores hijos.

When our premature baby arrives home

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Premature babies are those who are born before the 37th week of pregnancy. The date which is calculated as birth date is the 40th week of pregnancy. A baby who is born before that date, in the 38th week, is not regarded as premature. If they are born four weeks before, in the 36th week of pregnancy, they are premature babies. It is easy to understand that not all premature babies are the same, it is not the same to be born five weeks before, in the 35th week of pregnancy, than to be born in the 24th week of pregnancy, 16 weeks before the expected birth date.

It is sometimes believed that premature babies are only smaller babies, they weigh less and they only need to stay some time in the incubator to gain weight. It is true that premature babies weigh less, they have been less time in their mother's womb and, for that reason, they have gained less weight, but this is not their main problem. Premature babies are born with immature organs and, therefore, are not ready to perform the same functions that are needed because of this premature birth. The more premature the baby is, the more problems their organs will have to adapt to this and, due to this reason, they will need to go into hospital. They sometimes need to be in an intensive care unit because they need the help of some medicine and devices to make up for their organs' lack of maturity.

When a premature baby is discharged from hospital, it is because they are mature, they can be fed without any problems, their organs work well and they can control their temperature in a cradle.

Most premature babies will be children with a completely normal development but, nevertheless, they have some characteristics or peculiarities. Premature children end up maturing in a different environment from their mother's womb and, hence, their development has different characteristics that their parents should know. Thus, parents will feel safer and will not worry about aspects which are normal in babies who are born before it is due.

Corrected age

This is a very important concept that every premature baby parent must know. Corrected age is the name given to

the age that a child would be if they had been born in the 40th week of pregnancy, the likely birth date. For instance, a six-month-old baby who was born in the 32nd week of pregnancy, 8 weeks before the birth date, has a corrected age of 4 months. The eight weeks that were remaining up to the 40 weeks are deducted from their real age of six months and, therefore, their corrected age is six months less eight weeks, which is approximately equivalent to four months of corrected age. If a baby is born in their 24th week of corrected age, they are born 16 weeks before so, when their real age is 10 months, their corrected age will be 6 months since 16 weeks have to be deducted from real age.

The baby's development, weight and height are closely related to their corrected age and not to their real age. Corrected age is less important from two years onwards. It is not the same a 10-month-old baby than a 6-month-old one. However, when they are five years old, it is not very different to be five than to be five and four months. That is the reason why paediatricians have decided to use corrected age in all the assessments up to two years. After two years, they will use real age.

Special care when a premature baby arrives home.

Premature babies have problems to **control their temperature**. If it is hot in the room, they will get fever and if it is cold, their temperature will decrease under normal limits. The room must be between 21 and 23 degrees and attention must be paid to the baby's clothes. If you do not know if they are less or too covered, you can take their temperature.

The number of visits should be fully reduced. It is better to see them on the street than at home, since it is easier to transmit an infection in a close place than in an open one. It is very important that nobody touches the baby without cleaning their hands. If the mother or father has got a cold, they will use a mask when taking the baby. You must teach their siblings to clean their hands when they are going to touch them. Let them touch the baby, just teach them how to do.

As long as it is possible, avoid nursery schools, ideally up to three years. In these places, premature babies are exposed to other babies, some will have an infection and it will be easily transmitted.

A premature baby family.

Premature babies are not ready to be born and the same can happen to their parents. As it has been said before, some premature babies need to get into hospital for a long time and this causes trouble in a family. Parents must try to play the role of their baby caregiver even though they are in hospital. If they get involved from the beginning, everything will be better then. **Kangaroo care** increases milk production, it is positive for the child's development and reduces parents' anxiety and depression. Physical contact between parents and the baby is important since it contributes to the creation of the link. Having them as a kangaroo (figure 1), holding them in your arms, hugging them, kissing them will all contribute to the linkage process between parents and the baby. This process is usually hampered by hospitalization when needed.

When hospitalized, an extra effort shall be made to get some time to be with the baby siblings, if any. Siblings can feel abandoned by their parents, as they only seem to worry about a baby who is unknown and who they do not know where they are. For them, it is also good to visit them in hospital and see their face. They can perceive their fragility and they can understand better that their parents have to pay so much attention to that little baby. If most days, despite the parents' tiredness, they get some time for siblings, everybody will cope much better with this situation. When the new sibling arrives home, we must teach the others how to treat them, teach them to clean their hands before touching them and also allowing them to have physical contact with the premature sibling.

After being discharged, premature babies are still seen as very fragile and overprotective attitudes usually occur that sometimes make education difficult. Nonetheless, this can be well understood since some babies have been really small and very fragile. It is important that babies themselves feel safe. The safer they feel, the more independent they will be. Although we must protect them, we must also let them take small challenges.

Twins and triplets are usually premature. Nowadays, the number of twins and triplets has increased because of the use of assisted reproduction techniques. If having a premature baby changes a family life, if they are two or three premature babies and, moreover, if they are very premature, critical situations may occur because of implied tiredness and stress. Therefore, it is very important to look for support in your family or friends. Workload will be very important and easier if you get some help.

Women who have had a premature baby have more risk to have other premature babies but risk assessment must be done with a gynaecologist, who will give more accurate information. Women who were premature also have more risk to have premature babies.

Main points

- It is said that a baby is premature when they are born before the 37th week of pregnancy, but not every premature baby are the same.
- Premature babies end up maturing in a different environment and hence their development has some peculiar characteristics.
- Corrected age is more important than real age. Their development and grow will be assessed according to their corrected age, which is the age they would be if they had been born when it was due.
- They have problems to control their temperature and ease to get infections. Because of that, it is important to clean your hands before touching them.
- Breastmilk is the best food for premature babies. If they are being breastfed or with artificial milk, they need to eat more frequently than babies who are born when it is due and it is important to leave them rest in their intakes.
- Premature babies need iron and vitamin D supplements.
- They will sit when they are six or seven months of corrected age and they will walk when they are one.
- Talking to them and telling them stories, from their early childhood, will help them develop.
- Premature babies sometimes have development problems. If there is a problem or you have a doubt, visit your paediatrician.
- It is very important that parents have physical contact with the premature baby. Links will be thus stimulated and, in the case of the mother, milk production will increase.
- Vaccines will be received taking the real age into account and according to the paediatrician advice.



Figure 1: Kangaroo method: Half-naked mother or father will sit and take the naked baby or just with a nappy between the breasts. Both can be then covered with a blanket or with the mother's or father's clothes.