

## Physical Characteristics of a preterm baby

A premature infant is a baby born before 37 completed weeks of [gestation](#) (more than 3 weeks before the due date).

Prematurity is one of the common causes of infant mortality, therefore having the ability to identify the physical characteristics of a preterm baby is key in identifying and managing them.

### General characteristics of a preterm baby

The baby may appear pink or dark red, hands and feet may be cyanosed and may be jaundiced early.

**Posture:** flattened, abducted hips, flexed knees  
Swallowing and sucking reflexes absent or weak

### Skin and Appendages

The skin is covered by a small amount of vernix caseosa.

Lanugo is present on the sides of the face and on the extremities and the back.

There is scanty hair on the head and the eyebrows are usually absent.

The nipples and areola are inconspicuous.

The nails are soft.

Generalized edema is apparent at birth and later the tissue fluid decreases, leaving the skin loose and wrinkled.

Blood vessels can be easily seen under the skin because subcutaneous tissue is thin.

## Head

Skull bones are soft with large fontanelles, wide sutures.

Ear pinna looks flat, soft and fold easily on pressure and uncoil slowly.

Eyes are closed most of the time

Weak cry and there is no tears produce

## Neck and Thorax

The thorax is cone-shaped  
There is a sternal retraction,  
The baby has a rapid heart rate and respiratory noises.  
Occasionally, [cardiac murmurs](#) are heard on auscultation.  
A change in position may cause periods of apnea.

## Abdomen

The prominent, large liver and spleen  
Umbilicus appears lower in the abdomen  
The cord: white, fleshy and glistening.  
Plantar creases are absent.

## Genitalia

Labia majora fail to cover labia minora in females  
There may be undescended testes in males.

Learn more about prematurity, Causes and risk factors together with complications of preterm babies and their management.

- [Preterm births](#)