



Empowering Children. Supporting Families. Building Brighter Futures.

Resource 093 | Developmental risk factors

Low birth weight and development

What it means

Low birth weight means a birth weight below 2,500 grams, regardless of gestational age. It may reflect prematurity, restricted growth before birth, or both. It is a risk marker rather than a developmental diagnosis. Medical and developmental needs differ considerably, so follow-up should be individualized. [1]

Causes and risk factors

A baby may weigh less because they were born early or because growth during pregnancy was restricted. Placental, pregnancy, genetic, and other medical factors can contribute. Some causes remain unclear. Birth weight alone does not reveal the cause or justify assumptions about a parent's behavior. [1,2]

General family education. A concern deserves assessment, but this guide does not diagnose a child or prescribe treatment.



Signs and everyday impact

Early concerns can include feeding difficulty, trouble maintaining temperature, low energy, or slower growth, depending on the baby's condition. Later developmental concerns may occur but are not inevitable. Weight, length, head growth, medical history, and actual developmental progress all help identify support needs. [1,2]

Assessment and diagnosis

Clinicians interpret birth weight alongside gestational age and growth during pregnancy. After birth, they monitor feeding, growth, health, hearing, vision, and development as indicated. Corrected age may be relevant if the baby was also premature. Persistent concerns warrant assessment rather than reassurance based only on later weight gain. [1,2]

Treatment and therapy

Care supports safe feeding, adequate nutrition, warmth, and any associated medical needs. A clinician or dietitian guides supplementation or specialized nutrition when necessary. Developmental therapies are provided for identified needs. Follow-up intensity depends on the child's history and progress; no single therapy is required solely because birth weight was low. [1,2,3,4]

Support at home

Follow the prescribed feeding and growth-monitoring plan. Ask for help when feeds are tiring or intake is uncertain. Provide responsive interaction and age-appropriate play, while following safe-sleep advice. Keep follow-up appointments and report changes in feeding, energy, movement, communication, or responsiveness.

When to seek help

Poor feeding, inability to maintain hydration, breathing difficulty, unusual lethargy, or suspected illness in a young infant needs prompt care. New loss of skills or major developmental concerns warrants assessment.

Questions for your care team

- Was low weight related to prematurity, growth restriction, or both?
- What feeding and growth plan should we follow?
- Which developmental follow-up is appropriate?



Podcast preparation

Use this outline to develop a later podcast script.

Suggested opening

Welcome to Mariel Early Intervention. Today we discuss low birth weight and development. Low birth weight means a birth weight below 2,500 grams, regardless of gestational age. This is general education; each child needs individualized care.

Opening: Define the topic and its developmental context.

Understanding: Explain causes and signs without inviting self-diagnosis.

Assessment: Describe evaluation and distinguish screening from diagnosis.

Support: Discuss treatment, therapy, and practical family supports.

Closing: Explain urgent signs and one clear next step.

Misconception to address: Myth: low birth weight always means prematurity or disability. Gestational age and individual development also matter.

Before recording: update clinical references and local service details, arrange clinical review, and use fully consented or fictional examples.

Terms in plain language

- Low birth weight: birth weight below 2,500 grams.
- Growth restriction: reduced growth before birth relative to expected potential.
- Growth trajectory: the pattern of growth across repeated measurements.

Sources and further reading

Sources accessed 3 October 2026. Numbered references support the clinical overview. Treatment availability and referral routes vary by country.

[1] Newborn Health

<https://www.who.int/teams/maternal-newborn-child-adolescent-health-and-ageing/newborn-health/pre-term-and-low-birth-weight>

[2] Preterm birth

<https://www.who.int/en/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/preterm-birth>

[3] Health Issues in Premature Babies: Information for Parents

<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/baby/preemie/Pages/Health-Issues-of-Premature-Babies.aspx?form=XCXCUZZ>

[4] AAP Releases New Guidance on Faltering Weight in Children

<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/news/Pages/aap-issues-new-guidance-on-faltering-weight-in-children.aspx>