

Ultimate Canadian Medical Encyclopedia: Understanding, Preventing, and Treating Medical Conditions



PREGNANCY

Pregnancy covers all of the physiological phenomena that occur in pregnant women, from fertilization through childbirth. It normally lasts 40–42 weeks from the last menstrual period. After fertilization, the egg divides to form an embryo, which implants in the uterine wall and gradually develops into a fetus. During pregnancy, women undergo many physical changes, which often lead to benign problems. In some cases, the full term of pregnancy cannot be completed, resulting in premature birth or miscarriage. In industrialized countries, pregnant women receive pre-natal examinations that can detect any complications.

PREGNANCY

THE FETUS

From the eighth week of pregnancy through birth, the human being developing in the uterus is called a fetus. It grows a lot, especially during the second trimester, going from 8 to 50 cm, approximately (from 3 to 20 in.). It straightens out and its features become more pronounced, while its weight increases from nearly 8 g to 3.2 kg (¼ oz to 7 lb). In the twelfth week, its kidneys are working and the fetus starts to urinate in the amniotic fluid. Its cardiovascular system develops through the third month and its digestive system through the seventh month. The fetus is aware of tactile stimuli as early as the fourth month and starts to hear sounds from the outside world during the seventh month. At birth, the skeleton is completely formed, although the bones are still partly cartilage. The bones and several other organs, like the brain, the cerebellum and the genital organs, continue to develop after birth.

Genital organs
The external genital organs of the fetus become visible in the third month.

Placenta

The placenta develops in the pregnant woman's uterus (or ectoplasenta), besides exchanges between the fetus and the mother. By means of the umbilical cord, the maternal blood must pass through the placenta, providing nutrients, antibodies and oxygen to the fetus, and also remove its waste (carbon dioxide and urea).

Amniotic sac

The amniotic sac contains the fetus and the amniotic fluid, a transparent liquid (serum) composed of water and fetal urine that protects the fetus against temperature changes, shock from the outside and most infections. Layers of the amniotic sac, or water breaking, is normally triggered by various contractions at childbirth.

Umbilical cord

The umbilical cord connects the fetus to the placenta. It is mainly composed of blood vessels (one vein and two arteries).

Eyes

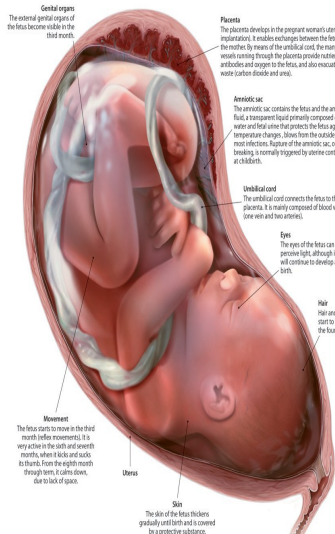
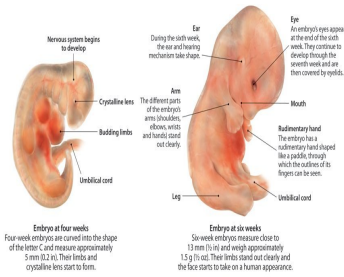
The eyes of the fetus can perceive light, although its sight will continue to develop after birth.

Hair

Hair and nails start to grow in the fourth month.

THE EMBRYO

From fertilization through the eighth week of pregnancy, the human being developing in the uterus is called an embryo. It develops from a fertilized egg (blastocyst) implanted in the endometrium. Some of the blastocyst's tissues grow into the placenta, the umbilical cord and the amniotic sac. Others become the different organs. As early as the third week, the embryo already has the start of a nervous system. Its heart begins to beat and blood flow is established. At the same time, its digestive and urinary systems also start to appear. Afterward, the organs develop and the skeleton hardens into bone. After eight weeks, the embryo has a human appearance and its members are clearly defined: it is now a fetus.



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