

## Neurological impact of premature birth starting to become known

Thanks to medical advances since the 1970s, premature infants — those born before 37 weeks of gestation — are increasingly able to survive. Some hospitals now try to save babies born as early as 22 weeks. But those developments are forcing doctors and parents to grapple with difficult decisions, because the chances of severe disability increase with the extent of prematurity. Cerebral palsy, for example, affects 1–2% of babies born at term, 9% of those born earlier than 32 weeks and 18% of those born at 26 weeks.

That is just half the story. Neuroscientists are developing an increasingly sophisticated picture of premature infants' brains that could help to inform medical decisions and treatments. From some long-term studies, they are learning that premature children face a higher risk than was previously thought of developing cognitive or behavioural problems — according to some studies, as many as half of them will.

Researchers are starting to ask why this should be, whether it could be avoided and what is the best way to provide educational support for the affected children. “We need to gather a lot more data to understand what the best strategies are,” says Petra Hüppi, a neonatologist and developmental paediatrician at the University of Geneva in Switzerland, who is following the brain development of children who were born prematurely.

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