Neurodevelopmental Outcomes of Preterm Birth
From Childhood to Adult Life
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Contents

List of contributors page vii
Preface ix

Section 1: Introduction

1 Epidemiology of preterm birth 1
Stefan Johansson and Sven Cnattigius

2 The changing face of intensive care for preterm newborns 17
John Wyatt

3 Clinical outcome: neurological sequelae following preterm birth 30
Ingeborg Krägeloh-Mann

Section 2: Neuroimaging

4 Imaging the preterm brain 39
Terrie E. Inder, Russell K. Lawrence, and Jeffrey J. Neil

5 Structural magnetic resonance imaging 54
Richard W. I. Cooke

6 Magnetic resonance imaging findings from adolescence to adulthood 68
Matthew P. G. Allin, Muriel Walshe, and Chiara Nosarti

7 Functional neuroimaging following very preterm birth 76
Chiara Nosarti and Larry Rifkin

8 Diffusion tensor imaging findings in preterm and low birth weight populations 97
Matthew P. G. Allin

Section 3: Behavioral outcome

9 Behavioral outcome of preterm birth in childhood and adolescence 113
Elaine Healy

10 Preterm birth and fetal growth in relation to adult psychopathology 127
Christina M. Hultman and Chiara Nosarti

Section 4: Neuropsychological outcome

11 Cognitive and functional outcomes of children born preterm 141
Betty R. Vohr

12 Methodological considerations in neurodevelopmental outcome studies of infants born prematurely 164
Glen P. Aylward

13 Language function after preterm birth 176
Teresa M. Rushe

14 A cognitive neuroscience perspective on the development of memory in children born preterm 185
Michelle de Haan

15 Executive function development in preterm children 195
Peter J. Anderson, Kelly Howard, and Lex W. Doyle

Section 5: Applied research

16 Academic performance and learning disabilities 209
H. Gerry Taylor
17 Pathways of risk and resiliency after prematurity: role of socioeconomic status 224
   Michael E. Msall, Mary C. Sullivan, and Jennifer Park

18 Cognitive and behavioral interventions 237
   Marie C. McCormick and Beth McManus

Section 6: Conclusions

19 Integrative summary and future directions 251
   Chiara Nosarti, Robin M. Murray, and Maureen Hack

Index 265

Color plate section between pp. 150 and 151
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At a time of exciting advances in neonatal intensive care and neuroimaging methods, when surviving preterm children represent an increasing percentage of the population, we conceived the current volume to provide the first single-source reference on the latest findings from research into the neurodevelopmental outcome following preterm birth.

New knowledge about the long-term cognitive, neurosensory, neurobiological, social, and behavioral correlates of preterm birth has emerged in the past decade mainly from two sources. Firstly, from “historical” studies of the initial preterm survivors who were examined from birth and have now reached adulthood. Secondly, from more recent studies using sophisticated neurodevelopmental assessments of the preterm infant at term, including neonatal magnetic resonance imaging techniques, which may potentially be used to identify the mechanisms underlying variations in outcome later in life; this may enable subgroups of individuals who are at increased risk of neurodevelopmental problems to benefit from appropriate intervention strategies which may be devised.

In this volume, many of the most admired and prolific investigators in different areas of preterm research present a comprehensive and up-to-date perspective on their work and areas of expertise, including directions for the future. We have been extremely fortunate to secure contributions from these researchers who have been instrumental in increasing the existing knowledge of the neurodevelopmental sequelae of preterm birth.

The volume is divided into six sections. The first introductory section presents an overview of the epidemiology of preterm birth and associated environmental and biological risk factors (Chapter 1). A historical account of the developments in neonatal care for preterm infants over the past 50 years is then provided, together with an exploration of the mechanisms of brain injury in the vulnerable preterm brain, which provides a powerful means for the development of preventative strategies (Chapter 2). A summary of the current state of knowledge of the clinical outcomes following various types and degrees of brain injury from a neurological perspective is then given (Chapter 3). Here we need to remember not only the importance of studying patterns of neurological and developmental disorders associated with very preterm birth, but also the context of the constantly changing and improving nature of neonatal intensive care.

The second section of the volume documents progress in neuroimaging research using various techniques, such as neonatal cranial ultrasound (Chapter 4), structural (Chapter 5) and functional (Chapter 7) magnetic resonance imaging, and diffusion tensor imaging (Chapter 8). Neonatal neuroimaging studies have identified several types of white and gray matter alterations in preterm infants compared to controls, and have also shown that severely abnormal findings can help to predict adverse neurodevelopmental outcomes. Valuable guidelines for the use of the various neonatal imaging techniques are provided (Chapter 4). Existing knowledge concerning longitudinal changes in the preterm brain in the framework of normal brain development is discussed in Chapter 6. Apart from the identification of injury–impairment relationships, an encouraging finding which emerges from neuroimaging data is the suggestion that processes of brain plasticity may enable the preterm brain to compensate, to an extent, for injuries that would cause severe loss of function in an adult, but often only result in mild impairment of functioning in preterm-born individuals.

The third section addresses research into the behavioral outcome following preterm birth, with specific chapters on childhood and adolescent (Chapter 9) and adult outcomes (Chapter 10). Although intrauterine and neonatal factors seem to be important in the pathogenesis of psychiatric disorders, no consensus has yet been reached concerning the interpretation of the association between preterm birth and psychopathology. Some methodological challenges in the field are discussed here.

The fourth section considers research on neuropsychological functioning following preterm birth.
Individual chapters provide summaries of research into the cognitive domains which have been found to be affected in preterm populations, such as language (Chapter 13), memory and learning (Chapter 14), and executive function (Chapter 15). Furthermore, this section includes an overview on the cognitive and functional profile of the preterm child (Chapter 11). Issues concerning neuropsychological outcomes as possible mediators of the effects of biological risks are also discussed. In addition to potential cause–effect inferences, Chapter 12 outlines methodological considerations which readers need to take into account when interpreting the results of outcome studies of individuals born very preterm/very low birth weight.

The fifth section links the current knowledge of the neurodevelopmental processes in preterm individuals with the environment in which they grow up. Chapter 16 summarizes studies investigating the educational attainment of preterm children and describes the substantial social impact of the often reported academic problems, both in terms of economic costs associated with educational resources and in terms of psychosocial adjustment of the preterm-born individual later in life. The impact of environmental variables, which may interact with and affect educational as well as neurodevelopmental outcome, sometimes independent of biological risks, are discussed in Chapter 17. A detailed overview of the results of intervention programs aimed at improving the neurodevelopmental outcome of very preterm individuals by limiting cognitive and behavioral complications, and providing cognitive enhancers, is given in Chapter 18. The results of published studies support the effectiveness of early intervention programs in improving the short- and medium-term cognitive outcomes, but they appear too heterogeneous to provide guidance on what may be the optimal duration and intensity of the intervention. Further research into ways of minimizing the impact of perinatal complications, especially in infants at greater biological (the extremely immature and low birth weight infants) and environmental risk (the socioeconomically disadvantaged), is warranted.

In the final section we summarize what is known to date about the neurodevelopmental sequelae of preterm birth, what the findings explain, and what research challenges are still unmet. We highlight some areas of research which could help further our understanding of the pathways to risk as well as resilience after preterm birth. These include the study of the molecular basis and genetic contribution to susceptibility to brain injury and of ways to modify the sociodemographic environment in which preterm infants grow and develop, including wider availability of and accessibility to intervention programs (Chapter 19).

We hope that this volume will be a valuable source of reference for pediatricians and neurologists, psychiatrists and psychologists, educators and neuroscientists alike, as we have attempted to discuss the implications of research findings for clinical practice. Apart from providing an up-to-date and concise summary of the explosion of research in this field, this volume aims to provide an accessible source of information across several disciplines. This book will have served its purpose if it succeeds in inspiring the next generation of researchers and clinicians to further knowledge of the pathophysiology of preterm birth and its neurodevelopmental sequelae, and lead on to the design and implementation of appropriate intervention services for individuals at risk of short- and long-term complications.
Introduction

In humans, pregnancy normally lasts nine months, ending with term birth after approximately 40 gestational weeks. Preterm birth is arbitrarily defined as delivery before 37 weeks, and could be further classified as moderately, very or extremely preterm, occurring at 32–36, 28–31, and ≤ 27 weeks, respectively.

Historically, there has been some confusion regarding the diverse concepts of “low birth weight” and “preterm birth.” In 1946, the American obstetrician Raymond D McBurney stated on a congress in San Francisco “… it is extremely annoying to have a pediatrician insist that the baby is premature because it may weigh only … five pounds” [1]. McBurney correctly emphasized that birth weight is not only a function of gestational age, but also fetal growth.

In research, the definitions of low, very low and extremely low birth weight (birth weights of < 2500 g, < 1500 g, and < 1000 g, respectively) have been widely used as proxies for preterm birth. However, studies defining preterm infants solely on birth weight criteria are limited by some degree of misclassification, i.e. growth restricted infants with more advanced gestational ages are probably over-represented in such studies.

In outcome research including preterm children and adults, it is important to distinguish preterm birth from intrauterine growth retardation, since gestational age and fetal growth may have differential impacts on outcome. One example is the associations between perinatal risk factors and cardiovascular disease. Studies have shown that preterm birth as well as fetal growth restriction is associated with hypertension in adulthood. In adults born very preterm, decreasing gestational age is associated with an increasing risk of high blood pressure regardless of fetal growth. In contrast, intrauterine growth retardation is the principal perinatal risk factor for hypertension in adults born moderately preterm and term [2].

Few fields in medicine have gone through such a rapid and remarkable development as neonatal medicine. Mortality of preterm infants has decreased dramatically during recent decades, and it is now possible to save the lives of extremely immature infants, born just more than half way through a normal pregnancy. Nevertheless, mortality rates increase substantially with decreasing gestational age, and especially extremely preterm infants face a high mortality risk.

Similar to mortality, neonatal morbidity is inversely related to gestational age. The most immature infants commonly suffer from multiple and interacting medical conditions, such as respiratory problems, infections, and brain hemorrhages, which may lead to permanent impairments. Among the new and growing generation of survivors of preterm birth, cognitive and behavioral problems are not uncommon.

Already during childhood, preterm birth has public health implications, related to pediatric healthcare resources, family support, and school education. In addition, if problems emerging in school age persist into adulthood, the need for societal assistance may also be increased later in life.

Researchers in perinatal epidemiology and neonatal medicine face several challenges. Increased knowledge on risk factors and biological mechanisms is needed to develop efficient strategies to prevent preterm birth. Further refinement of neonatal care is necessary to improve short-term mortality and morbidity among preterm infants. Well-designed follow-up studies are essential to learn more about long-term outcomes, in particular for the growing number of children surviving very and extremely preterm birth in the current era of neonatal medicine.

Definitions of preterm birth

Gestational length to non-elective delivery in humans has been estimated as being 282–283 days [3].
Gestational age of a newborn infant is categorized as preterm, term, or post-term (Fig. 1.1), as proposed by the World Health Organization in the 1970s [4]. Preterm birth occurs before 37 completed gestational weeks and could further be subdivided into moderately preterm, very preterm, and extremely preterm. As in this chapter, “very preterm birth” usually refers to all births at ≤ 31 weeks, including also extremely preterm births at ≤ 27 weeks.

To determine gestational age at birth, it is necessary to date the pregnancy and calculate the expected date of delivery (EDD) occurring at 40 completed gestational weeks. One commonly used method is to define EDD as 280 days from the last menstrual period (LMP), using the so-called pregnancy wheel (Fig. 1.2) [5].

The simplicity of this method makes it well suited for low-resource communities. Despite problems of recalling the correct date of LMP [6] the estimations of gestational age are reasonably good [5,7] and can be used in perinatal epidemiology research when other dating methods are unavailable.

A more accurate way to date the pregnancy is to measure fetal size in early pregnancy, using ultrasound techniques [8]. Fetal growth velocity is constant during early pregnancy [9], and measures such as femoral length and head circumference are proportional to gestational length. Hence, such measures can be used to predict EDD and calculate gestational age in clinical practice [10]. Gestational age derived from LMP typically results in overestimates of about 2–3 days [7]. Importantly, changing the pregnancy dating method from LMP to ultrasound could have an impact on gestational age distribution, leading to an increase in preterm birth rate and a concomitant decrease in post-term birth rate [11]. Hence, rates of preterm birth may not be comparable if these are based on different methods of estimating gestational age.

Rates of preterm birth

Contrary to the general belief, preterm birth is a common pregnancy complication. Internationally, the variation of preterm birth rates is striking. About 6% of all pregnancies end preterm in Sweden (2003) [12], whereas the corresponding figure for the USA is reported to be almost 13% (2005) [13]. In developing countries, rates may be even higher. In a study including ultrasound-dated pregnancies in Malawi, 20% of women delivered preterm [14].

Very preterm births, occurring before 32 completed gestational weeks, account for about 15% of preterm births, which means that 1–2% of all pregnancies end very preterm [12,13].

Rates of preterm birth seem to be constant or even decreasing in the UK and Sweden [15,16], but several countries report increasing rates over recent decades [13,17,18]. This observation has been attributed to a number of factors, such as the introduction of ultrasound pregnancy dating, more frequent medically
induced preterm deliveries, assisted reproduction, and more frequent twin births [17,18]. Increasing preterm birth rates seem to be explained by a greater number of moderately preterm births, since rates of very preterm birth have been stable over time [13,16].

**Risk factors for preterm birth**

Preterm birth has been associated with a number of risk factors (Table 1.1).

<table>
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<td>Ethnicity</td>
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<td>Family history</td>
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<tr>
<td>Infections</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maternal characteristics</td>
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<td>Socioeconomic status</td>
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<td>Multiple pregnancies</td>
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<td>Smoking and substance abuse</td>
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<td>Air pollution</td>
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**Ethnicity**

Epidemiological studies have shown differences in rates of preterm birth among different ethnic groups [19]. In the USA during 2005, 19% of pregnancies ended preterm among black non-Hispanic women, whereas only 12% of white non-Hispanic women delivered preterm [13]. Corresponding rates for very preterm birth were 2.3% and 1.1%, respectively. In addition, black women do not only face an increased risk of preterm birth. Compared to white women, they are also at an increased risk of repeated preterm birth [19]. Although such findings may be explained by environmental or/and/ socioeconomic factors, they could also indicate that some ethnic groups have a genetic predisposition for preterm birth [20].

**Family history**

One preterm delivery increases the risk of preterm deliveries in subsequent pregnancies [21,22] and the risk of repeating a preterm delivery is especially high for very preterm birth [21]. The heritability of preeclampsia, a common cause of preterm delivery, has been estimated to approximate 31%, and genetic factors may account for one third of all preterm deliveries [23,24]. The mechanisms underlying such genetic influences remain to be determined, but case-control studies support the idea that inflammatory responses may be influenced by genetic factors [25–27].

**Infections**

Bacterial vaginosis and intrauterine bacterial infections are well-established risk factors of preterm delivery [28]. Bacterial vaginosis may increase the risk of very preterm delivery more than two fold [29], and intrauterine infection is reported to be associated with even higher risks, especially for extremely preterm birth [30]. Infections localized to organ systems other than the reproductive tract may also be important. Periodontal infections have been reported to more than double the risk of very preterm birth [31].

The uterus and amniotic membranes can become infected in several ways. Bacteria can migrate to the uterus from the vagina or the abdominal cavity, be introduced during invasive procedures such as chorionic villi sampling [32], or through hematogenous spread [33]. If chorioamnionitis develops, the risk of very preterm delivery is increased, especially if an inflammatory response is also elicited in the fetus, when the risk of extremely preterm birth may increase ten fold [30].

A number of bacteria have been cultured from amniotic fluid and chorioamniotic membranes in preterm deliveries; vaginal organisms with low virulence, such as *Ureaplasma urealyticum*, *Mycoplasma hominis*, *Gardnerella vaginalis*, and *Bacteroides* species, and several other bacteria such as *Escherichia coli*, *Enterococcus faecalis*, *Streptococcus* species, and *Chlamydia trachomatis* [28].

While much focus has been on bacteria, less is known about the role of viral infections. The only larger epidemiological study suggested that Parvovirus B19 may be associated with an increased risk of late spontaneous abortion and stillbirth [34]. The prevalence of immunoglobulin M (IgM) seropositivity for Parvovirus B19 among women with such pregnancy complications was 13% as compared with 1.5% in the remaining pregnant population [34]. Smaller clinical studies and case-series also report that viral infections may increase the risk of preterm delivery. Levels of antibodies against Cytomegalovirus were found to be higher in women with early onset preeclampsia and preterm delivery, compared to women with normal pregnancies ending at term [35]. *Cytomegalovirus* was also more commonly detected in dried neonatal blood
spots, sampled after birth, in infants born preterm than in term infants (prevalence 33% versus 24%)[36].

Maternal characteristics
Several maternal characteristics have been associated with preterm birth. Firstly, as already described, preterm birth rates differ by ethnicity. Secondly, maternal age is reported to influence pregnancy outcome. Low and high maternal age increase the risk of preterm birth [37,38]. Moreover, maternal age has been shown to interact with parity, i.e., the risk of preterm birth being highest in younger multiparae and older primiparae [39]. Compared with 25- to 29-year-old primiparae, the risk of preterm birth is approximately doubled for multiparae aged less than 18 years and for primiparae aged more than 40 years. One may speculate that teenage mothers with several children are exposed to less favorable socioeconomic conditions [40]. Delayed childbearing at an older age is related to more prevalent assisted reproduction, higher risk of preeclampsia, and more frequent twin pregnancies [41].

Finally, reproductive history may be important. Previous induced abortions may increase the risk of very preterm births with spontaneous onset [42]. Women with a previous second trimester spontaneous abortion or a previous very preterm delivery are at increased risk of very preterm delivery in a subsequent pregnancy [19,21]. A short interval between subsequent pregnancies (<6 months) has also been reported to be a risk factor, doubling the risk of extremely preterm delivery in subsequent pregnancies [43]. However, the association between a short interpregnancy interval and other adverse pregnancy outcomes including preterm birth may be confounded by socioeconomic factors [44] or adverse outcomes in previous pregnancies [45].

Socioeconomic status
There are marked socioeconomic inequalities in preterm birth rates. The differences in preterm birth rates between countries like Sweden, USA, and Malawi are probably partly explained by different socioeconomic contexts [12–14]. Within developed countries, socioeconomic status is also related to risk of preterm birth. A recent British study demonstrated that very preterm birth was twice as common among women living in the most deprived areas compared to women in the least deprived areas [46]. Similar conclusions were drawn in Norway, where maternal characteristics such as single motherhood and low education were associated with a 25% and 50% increase in risk of preterm birth, respectively [47].

Multiple pregnancies
An American study reported that 54% of twins were born preterm [48]. In Europe, preterm birth rates in twin pregnancies vary from 42% in Ireland to 68% in Austria, amounting to 20% of all preterm births [49]. Twins resulting from subfertility treatment are more commonly born preterm compared to naturally conceived twins [50]. The majority of preterm births in singletons are due to spontaneous onset of labor, but induced deliveries account for about half of preterm births among twins [49].

In absolute terms, neonatal outcome of multiple pregnancies is generally worse than in singleton pregnancies [51]. However, besides intrauterine growth retardation, prematurity is the principal factor responsible for increased mortality and morbidity rates in twins and triplets. When gestational age is taken into account, risks of neonatal mortality and morbidity are not increased in multiple pregnancies compared to single pregnancies [52].

Smoking and substance abuse
Maternal smoking has a dose-dependent impact on risk of preterm birth [53]. Heavy smoking (≥10 cigarettes per day) may increase the risk of very preterm delivery more than two fold. Exposure to environmental tobacco smoke (passive smoking) has also been associated with an increased risk, yet lower than for active smoking [54]. The association between snuff (smokeless tobacco) and preterm birth is less well studied, but an investigation from Sweden found that snuff increased the risk of preterm birth by 79% [55]. A South African study concluded that snuff did not affect the rate of preterm birth, although women using snuff had slightly shorter gestational length in term births compared to women not using snuff [56].

Abuse of other drugs during pregnancy, including narcotics and alcohol, is associated with a number of poor perinatal outcomes, including preterm birth [57]. Prenatal drug exposure to tobacco and cocaine has been estimated to account for 5.7% of preterm births in American settings [58]. Excessive alcohol use is also reported to be more common among women who deliver preterm [59]. However, narcotics and alcohol may be part of a low socioeconomic lifestyle, and it is difficult to disentangle the independent roles
of substance abuse versus deprived socioeconomic circumstances.

Air pollution
Exposure to ambient air pollution, such as particulate matter, ozone, carbon monoxide, and nitric dioxide, has been reported in several studies to increase the risk of preterm birth in a dose-dependent manner [60,61]. However, there are also published studies which reported negative results [62]. Despite attempts to adjust for socioeconomic status in studies reporting positive findings [60,61], one cannot exclude that residual socioeconomic confounders may contribute to explain the association between air pollutants and preterm birth.

Etiologies and biological mechanisms
The variety of identified risk factors could be translated into different etiologies of preterm birth (Table 1.2).

Firstly, one needs to consider two principally different etiological concepts; spontaneous preterm birth and medically induced preterm birth [63]. The majority of preterm births have spontaneous onset, initiated by premature labor, rupture of membranes, or vaginal bleeding [49]. The remaining preterm births are medically induced on maternal or fetal indications, typically due to preeclampsia. This heterogeneity of preterm births needs to be considered in research on etiological concepts and biological mechanisms [63]. Neonatal outcome may be more dependent on gestational age at birth than on the etiology of preterm birth [64], but risk factors may have differential impact on spontaneous and induced preterm birth, respectively [65].

Secondly, the various etiologies of preterm birth are related to several biological pathways (Table 1.3).

Genetic mechanisms
Ethnic differences [19], risk of repeated preterm delivery [21,22], and familial aggregation of preeclampsia and preterm birth [23,24] indicate that genetic mechanisms are important for preterm birth.

One may speculate about genetic influences on several physiological processes leading to preterm delivery. Polymorphisms of genes involved in the immune system could be related to preterm delivery. One genotype of a promotor gene for interleukin (IL)-6, regulating responses to stressful stimuli, was found in 38% of mothers with very preterm deliveries, and in 29% of mothers with term deliveries [25]. Tandem repeat polymorphism of the gene for the IL-1 receptor antagonist, involved in duration and severity of inflammation, was found in 27% of women with preterm deliveries, compared to 12% of women with term deliveries [26]. Polymorphisms of immunoregulatory genes for IL-10 and mannose-binding protein 2 (MBL2) have also been more commonly found in women with preterm births and may increase the risk of chorioamnionitis [27], a pregnancy complication often preceding spontaneous preterm birth.

A low intake of dietary vitamin C may increase the risk of preterm birth [66], and genetic variants of a membrane-bound vitamin C transporter may double the risk of spontaneous preterm delivery [67]. Polymorphisms in folate-metabolizing genes, affecting homocysteine levels, may also play a role for spontaneous preterm delivery, especially in black women with low folate intake [68].

Inflammation
The association between intrauterine infections and preterm birth involves biological pathways related to inflammation [28]. Bacterial colonization and release of toxins activates the production of cytokines, such as tumor necrosis factor α (TNFa) and IL-6. Cytokines stimulate prostaglandin production in the chorioamniotic membranes and placenta and lead to infiltration of neutrophilic white blood cells. Activation of metalloproteases leads to weakening of chorioamniotic membranes and cervical ripening. Prostaglandins also stimulate myometrial contractions. The inflammatory response culminates in preterm labor and rupture of the membranes.

An inflammatory response in the fetus also contributes to preterm labor and rupture of membranes.
Chorioamnionitis could result in fetal stress involving the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal axis (HPA axis). Fetal release of cortisol contributes to increased levels of prostaglandins.

A schematic view of inflammatory pathways leading to preterm delivery is shown in Fig. 1.3.

Vascular mechanisms
Preeclampsia and placental abruption are pregnancy complications often resulting in medically induced preterm delivery. Although principally different, both complications can be attributed to impaired placental vascular function.

Preeclampsia, affecting 3–5% of pregnant women, is a complex disorder initiating already during the critical process of implantation and placentation shortly after conception [69,70]. Inadequate invasion of endovascular cells, placental production of anti-angiogenic factors, and development of endothelial dysfunction leads to small-bore, high-resistant placental vessels that cannot respond to the increasing demand of blood supply and nutrition to the fetus. Clinical manifestations of preeclampsia, such as hypertension, renal dysfunction, and neurological symptoms, may necessitate preterm delivery on maternal indication. More commonly, delivery is induced on fetal indication, due to signs of fetal stress including abnormal umbilical blood flow and growth restriction.

Placental abruption, complicating 0.5–1% of pregnancies, is a too early separation of the placenta from the uterine wall, diagnosed by a combination of ultrasound findings and clinical signs, such as vaginal bleeding, abdominal pain, and fetal distress [71]. Clinical outcome depends on the degree of placental detachment, the degree of fetal distress, and gestational age at abruption, but the risk of perinatal mortality in very preterm deliveries following abruption is substantially increased [72].

Neuroendocrine stress responses
The association between low socioeconomic status and preterm delivery could be mediated by psychological
distress during pregnancy [73]. Maternal stress activates the HPA axis, illustrated by elevated cortisol levels in gestational week 15 in women who later delivered preterm [74]. Increased secretion of cortisol stimulates placental secretion of corticotropin-releasing hormone (CRH), interacting with prostaglandins and oxytocin, which mediate uterine contractions. Secretion of CRH is reported to be elevated in pregnant women who later deliver preterm [75] and it has been suggested that serum levels of CRH may be a useful marker in the clinical assessment of the risk of parturition in women presenting with preterm contractions [76].

Mechanical stress

Finally, mechanical stress of the uterus and cervix could be associated with preterm delivery. Cesarian section in a first pregnancy increases the risk of preterm birth in a second pregnancy [77]. Uterine overdistension is assumed to increase the risk of preterm delivery, exemplified by shorter gestations in twin pregnancies, especially in those with excessive amniotic fluid (polyhydramnios) [78]. Leiomyomata, benign neoplasms in the uterine wall, are associated with an increased risk of preterm delivery, supposedly due to increased mechanical strain on the uterus [79]. One proposed mechanism is that stretching of fetal membranes increases IL-8 concentrations and collagenase activity, implicated in cervical ripening [80]. Finally, incompetence of the cervix has been regarded to be casually related to preterm delivery, and cervical cerclage (tracheloplasty) has been widely used in attempts to prevent preterm birth. However, cervical cerclage is largely an unsuccessful strategy [81], which suggests that the cervix plays more than just a mechanical role [82].

Relations between risk and biology

There are probably complex relationships between risk factors of preterm birth and biological mechanisms. One risk factor may be important for several pathways and vice versa. In Fig. 1.4 we have made an attempt to summarize these relationships.

Prevention efforts

The ultimate goal of research on risk factors, etiologies, and biological mechanisms of preterm birth is to develop preventive strategies. Especially very preterm infants face substantial risks of mortality or long-term neurological sequelae [83,84]. There are also economic implications. Neonatal intensive care is associated with significant costs, which increase exponentially with decreasing gestational age [85]. Preventing preterm deliveries would not only save lives, but also yield large cost savings.

The majority of preterm births have a spontaneous onset [49]. Given the association between preterm delivery and infections [28], antibiotic treatment could provide a potential strategy for prevention. However, large randomized controlled trials have drawn rather disappointing conclusions. Antibiotic treatment of women in preterm labor with intact membranes does not delay or prevent preterm delivery [86]. Similarly, treatment does not prevent preterm birth in pregnant women with bacterial vaginosis [87]. Antibiotic treatment of women with premature rupture of the membranes does not reduce the rate of preterm births, but can to some extent delay preterm delivery [88]. Still, it is possible that antibiotic treatment could be beneficial if offered to high-risk groups, as indicated by a large American study: in black urban women screened for reproductive tract infections, antibiotics reduced
the risk of preterm delivery (relative risk = 0.16, 95% confidence interval [CI] = 0.04–0.66) [89].

Maternal periodontal disease is associated with an increased risk of preterm birth [31]. If bacterial load in the oral cavity contributes to chorioamnionitis, through hematogeneous spread or due to increased systemic inflammatory activity, treatment of periodontal disease could be beneficial for pregnancy outcome. One small pilot study showed that treatment of periodontal disease during pregnancy reduced systemic inflammation, measured by levels of IL-6, and reduced the risk of preterm birth (odds ratio = 0.26, 95% CI = 0.08–0.85) [90]. However, in a larger study treatment of periodontitis had no effect on risk of preterm birth, despite improved periodontal health in treated women [91].

Prevention of preeclampsia, as a means to prevent preterm birth, has been extensively studied [92]. Many strategies have been tested, including lifestyle choices (rest or exercise), various nutritional measures, and drugs. However, almost all strategies have been unsuccessful, with the exception of moderate benefits of low-dose aspirin and calcium supplementation [93, 94]. Antioxidants seem to decrease the risk of preeclampsia, but results should be interpreted cautiously, especially since antioxidants may increase the risk of preterm birth [95]. Treatment of preeclamptic women with antihypertensive drugs is widely used, but there are limited data supporting that such treatment may reduce the risk of preterm delivery [96].

Smoking and substance abuse are potentially preventable factors associated with preterm birth. Women who stop smoking from their first their to second pregnancy reduce their risk of preterm birth to that of non-smoking women [21]. A recent meta-analysis including randomized controlled trials concluded that smoking cessation during pregnancy was associated with a 16% reduction of risk of preterm delivery [97]. Studies on treatment of substance abuse with regard to infant outcomes are scarce, but two small studies have found that gestational length increases somewhat in women undergoing such treatment [98, 99].

Similarly, social disadvantage may be a target for intervention programs. However, a large randomized trial of psychosocial support and health education during high-risk pregnancies could not find that such interventions reduced the risk of preterm birth [100]. A recent meta-analysis of studies on social support during pregnancy came to the same conclusion [101].

Mortality during the neonatal period and during infancy

Infant mortality (death during the first year of life) has decreased during the last four decades for all infants, as demonstrated by national birth statistics from Sweden (Fig. 1.5, unpublished data from the Medical Birth Register). The reduction in infant mortality over time is mainly explained by decreased neonatal mortality (death during the first four weeks of life), although postneonatal mortality (death after the first four weeks of life but before one year of life) has declined somewhat.

The same pattern of improved survival during the neonatal period is seen among term, moderately preterm and very preterm infants, but in absolute numbers, the improvement is most dramatic for very preterm infants (<31 weeks) (Fig. 1.6). From 1973 to 2002, neonatal mortality rates decreased from 401 to 90 per 1000 live-born very preterm infants, whereas the corresponding rates per 1000 live-born moderately preterm infants (32–36 weeks) and term infants (≥37 weeks) decreased from 34 to 8 and from 3 to 1, respectively. This improvement in survival among very preterm infants during the neonatal period has primarily been attributed to improvements of neonatal intensive care, including the introduction of antenatal corticosteroids and surfactant for prevention and treatment of respiratory distress syndrome [102].

Mortality in very preterm infants is inversely related to gestational age. Despite the overall reduction, the most immature infants still face a substantial risk of death, as illustrated by recently reported mortality rates from Sweden, and the Australia and New Zealand Neonatal Network (Fig. 1.7) [103,104].

Another way to express the relation over time between mortality and gestational age is that the so-called “border-of-viability” has shifted to the left. Today, extremely small and immature infants could be considered as candidates for resuscitation and admission to neonatal intensive care units. However, as demonstrated by data from the Vermont Oxford Network, mortality rates are exceptionally high among the tiniest infants [105]. Of infants born with a birth weight of 401–500 g (mean gestational age of 23 weeks), overall survival was only 17%.

1 The Vermont Oxford Network is a worldwide network of neonatal intensive care units, which report their outcome data to a central database. Any neonatal intensive care unit can join the Vermont Oxford Network.
A large proportion of infants born at the “border-of-viability” die because of decisions taken shortly after delivery to limit intensive care and provide only palliative treatment [106]. Therefore, management policies could be important for survival in the most immature infants. Studies from Sweden and Germany support that proactive management promotes survival in infants born at 22–25 gestational weeks [107,108].

To improve survival, the regional and/or national organization of neonatal intensive care also needs to be considered. The complex nature of neonatal intensive care demands highly qualified staffing as well as access to advanced technologies. In several studies from different countries, level-III neonatal intensive care units, i.e. university hospitals, have had lower mortality rates when compared with smaller level-II units. However,