

PRESS RELEASE

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Premature babies thrive against the odds, study finds

Clinging precariously to life in a neonatal incubator, a premature baby starts life behind the eight ball, three times more likely to suffer early development problems than babies who arrive on time.

Poor vision and hearing, retarded physical growth, lack of coordination and mobility and learning difficulties are some of the early problems they face.

And until now, the popular belief that "prem" and low birth weight babies carried these problems throughout life.

But according to a world-leading long-term study on pre-term babies being conducted at Melbourne's Royal Women's Hospital, babies who arrive well before they are due soon catch up to their peers.

The Preterm Infant Follow-up Program, headed by Associate Professor Lex Doyle, is conducting individual examinations of hundreds of premature and low birth-weight babies at ages two, five, eight and 14.

The study, which includes children born before 28 weeks or weighing under one kilogram, has found that by age five almost all of the children are at the same stage of development as their peers unless they are suffering some form of brain injury.

The study tests the children for hearing, vision, psychological disorders, respiration, behaviour and IQ.

Dr Doyle's researchers believe that unless there is a permanent brain injury, babies seem to have a self-determining program that is delayed slightly, but not permanently, by a premature birth.

An example of this development program can be seen in the time a foetus starts sucking and swallowing at about 34 weeks. Even if a baby is born prior to that stage, it will not start performing this activity until 34 weeks after conception.

Dr Doyle hopes the study will help improve survival rates and shed further light on what causes problems to occur in premature babies. At present, more than 70 per cent of babies born at less than one kilogram survive.

While it would be impossible to reduce the problems in premature babies altogether, Dr Doyle said the study was working towards limiting the number to as close to zero as possible.

"That is the next thing to focus on, although it must be read in the context that even babies who arrive after a full-term pregnancy, not all of them are without some form of problem," he said.

"The benefit of this type of study is that it helps us understand what happens before and after birth and that way we can hopefully improve the survival rate more and more."

