Long Term Effects of Low-Birth Weight

Low birth weight is currently the leading cause of infant mortality. There are many risk factors of low birth weight and/or pre-term birth. These risk factors often include infection, history of pre-term birth, diabetes, hypertension, women who are pregnant with twins, triplets, or more, and women with cervical and/or uterine irregularities. Many of these causes are medical complications that cannot be managed but there are behavioral risk factors that women can control. Such factors include smoking tobacco products, drinking alcohol, using illicit drugs, late or no prenatal care, and obesity. Although obesity is not a direct cause of pre-term birth and low birth weight, obesity does increase rates of medical complications such as diabetes and hypertension which can lead to low birth weight.

Low birth weight infants run the risk of developing many complications. Respiratory distress, sleep apnea, heart problems, jaundice, anemia, chronic lung disorders, and infections are just some of the obstacles that low birth weight babies may face. Although several complications associated with pre-term birth may decrease or disappear with time, a few of them are permanent. For example, low birth weight has been associated with hyperactivity disorders and developmental issues, especially those developmental issues related with school achievement.

While there are many opposing theories about the cognitive deficits of children born of low birth weight, the one common belief is that low birth weight children have a greater chance of repeating a grade in school as well as more difficulty graduating from high school in a timely fashion. According to Conley and Bennet (2000), children of low birth weight are 34% less likely to graduate from high school at an appropriate age. These
researchers believe that “biological health at infancy affects development, which, in turn, affects socioeconomic status-producing [generations of poverty and poor health]” (p. 465).

Although there are many complications associated with low birth weight, pre-term birth does not entail a life of hardships for all premature infants. Boardman et al. (2002) found distinct differences between babies born at very low birth weights (< 1,500 grams) and babies born at moderately low birth weights (1,500-2,499 grams). In order to derail some of the negative effects of very low birth weight, pregnant women can make behavior changes during their pregnancy to increase their chances of carrying to full term. These changes include the discontinuation of the use of tobacco products, alcohol products, and all illicit drugs. Also, by receiving appropriate pre-natal care a woman who is pregnant can lower her risk of having a pre-term infant.

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References:


