Low Birthweight Babies
What is the Risk?

In our mother’s day, doctors would often limit the amount of pounds that a pregnant woman should gain by telling them to diet or restrict their weight gain to less than 20 pounds. They thought that small babies were easier to deliver. We now know better. Babies born too small (less than 5½ pounds) are related to 70 percent of infant deaths.

What is low Birthweight?
Any baby below 5½ pounds is considered low birthweight. If the baby weighs less than 3 pounds 5 ounces it is very low birthweight.

There are usually two types of low birthweight:
♦ preterm births before the 38th week of pregnancy; and
♦ small-for-date babies are full-term but underweight

What Can Happen to a Low Birthweight Baby?
Low birthweight babies are more likely to have medical complications including:
♦ Have trouble breathing. The lungs may not be able to provide enough oxygen for its needs.
♦ Have brain damage due to not enough nutrients getting to the brain.
♦ Have brain damage due to severe jaundice from a liver not functioning properly.
♦ Be anemic (fewer red blood cells) because it did not have time to store the iron it needed to nourish these cells.
♦ Have a low body temperature because they do not have enough fat stores to stay warm. This can lead to chemical changes in the body and slow growth.
♦ Have bleeding in the brain. 40 to 50 percent of too small babies have brain damage or die due to this problem. If the baby survives infancy, problems may still occur later in childhood.

What causes Low Birthweight?
The good news is that most reasons for too-small babies can be corrected easily by the mother. Medical problems of the mother can lead to low birthweight, so these mothers need ongoing contact with their health care provider.

A mother’s life-style and nutrition habits can lead to too-small babies and with some help, CAN BE CHANGED. The main ones are:
♦ Poor nutrition—the correct amount of weight gain during pregnancy and eating healthy foods nourish the fetus.
♦ Lack of early and regular prenatal care—many things can be corrected if caught early enough.
♦ Smoking, alcohol and drugs—smokers have smaller babies.
♦ Drug and alcohol can slow growth of the fetus.