Preparing for Twins and Triplets

Supporting Professionals Supporting Families
PREPARING FOR TWINS AND TRIPLETS
What are the facts about twins? How often do they happen? In the United Kingdom the incidence of twins is currently about one in 70 maternities which means that one in 35 children is born a twin. The incidence in the 1940s and 1950s was one in 80.

It then fell until the end of the 1970s when the incidence was about one in 105. We do not know why the fall occurred but the current rise is probably due to various kinds of treatments for infertility. Other factors such as increasing age of mothers also contribute.
TYPES OF TWINS
There are two types of twins. **Monozygotic** twins otherwise known as ‘**identical**’ or **uniovular** (arising from one egg). A **zygote** is a fertilised egg. Monozygotic twins have the same genes and blood groups and the same main physical features such as hair and eye colour, facial features etc.

However, they may be of different sizes and sometimes have quite different personalities.

**Dizygotic** twins, otherwise known as ‘**non-identical’, fraternal or binovular** (from two eggs) are no more alike than any brother or sister. They may be the same sex or of different sex.

**Monozygotic** twins arise when a single fertilised egg (zygote) splits in two. Each half will contain the same genes and chromosomes and the babies must therefore be of the same sex.

**Dizygotic** twins arise when two separate eggs are fertilised by different sperms. Because in any conception there is a 50/50 chance of a boy or girl, half of fraternal twins will be boy/girl pairs. A quarter of dizygotic twins will be both boys and a quarter both girls.

In the UK two thirds of twins are dizygotic and one third monozygotic. It therefore works out that approximately a third of twins are girls, a third are boys and a third boy/girl pairs.
DETERMINING ZYGOSITY
How do you tell whether the twins are monozygotic or not? The process of finding out is known as determination of zygosity. In a third of cases it will clearly be straightforward because the babies are of different sex. Amongst twins of the same sex, by the time the children are two years old or so their zygosity is usually quite clear from their physical features. However, many parents do not want to wait as long as this. Certainly at birth even monozygotic twins may look very different because of differences in position or nourishment in the womb.

Placentation of Twins

MONOZYGOTIC OR DIZYGOTIC

MONOZYGOTIC

The placenta will give guidance in two thirds of monozygotic twins. If the babies have a single outer membrane, the chorion, they must be monozygotic. But one third of monozygotic twins, those whose egg has split early before the placenta started to form, will have two chorions with either a fused placenta or two separate placentae. These placentae are indistinguishable from those of dizygotic twins.

The most accurate way to determine zygosity in all like-sex twins with dichorionic placentae is by a test performed on DNA to tell whether they are genetically identical. The DNA is extracted from swabs taken from inside the mouth and can be performed on twins of any age. Please contact the MBF for further details.

THE ORIGIN OF TWINS
Why do twins occur? As far as monozygotic twins are concerned we just do not know. It seems that all fertile women of all races have an equal chance of having monozygotic twins and that chance is approximately one per 350 - 400 pregnancies. Monozygotic twins do not run in families except in extremely rare families where
it seems that there is a dominant gene for identical twins.

As far as dizygotic twins are concerned there are known predisposing factors, although it is never possible to predict if a particular woman will conceive twins.

Dizygotic twins occur much more commonly in black races and least frequently in oriental races. Caucasians and Asian Indians have an incidence somewhere in the middle. The chance of having twins also increases with age until the late 30’s and with parity, that is the number of previous children. Dizygotic twins run on the mother’s side of the family but probably not on the father’s.

**THE PREGNANCY**

A multiple pregnancy is on average shorter than a single pregnancy, which is 40 weeks. The average length for twins is 37 weeks, triplets 34 weeks and quads 33 weeks.

Although it is relatively rare for a baby to present by the breech (bottom first) in a single pregnancy, about 50% of multiple pregnancies result in at least one baby presenting by the breech. In nearly 10% of multiple pregnancies both babies will be breech presentations.

**Presentation of Twins Before Delivery**

- **Vertex + Vertex**
- **Vertex + Breech**
- **Breech + Vertex**
- **Breech + Breech**
- **Vertex + Transverse**
- **Breech + Transverse**
When you are diagnosed with a multiple pregnancy, ask if your hospital runs any special antenatal classes for parents expecting twins or more. It is advisable to consider booking your place on the routine antenatal classes to start earlier than usual, at around 24 to 26 weeks.

You might also like to ask about some of the following topics at routine antenatal classes, if the hospital does not run specific multiple birth classes:

1. Chances of having your babies prematurely - ask if you can visit the neonatal unit
2. Diet and exercise during a twin pregnancy
3. Your hospital’s management of labour and delivery
4. Zygosity - ask if the hospital has a routine procedure for establishing whether or not the babies are monozygotic
5. Feeding, especially breastfeeding. If it is at all possible, try to meet a mother who is successfully breastfeeding her twins. Your parentcraft sister or local twins club might be able to help with an introduction.
6. Equipment: hints on buying buggies, prams, car seats, etc.
7. Tips on how to cope in the postnatal period, for example with tiredness caused by frequent night feeds, with difficulties in getting out of the house in the early days with two or more babies, and with arranging practical help with shopping, housework etc.

Twin babies tend to be smaller than single babies partly because they are born earlier than single babies and partly because they grow less well in the later part of pregnancy. Fortunately the human womb is able to nourish up to four babies very well until the 24th week or so of the pregnancy. This is a critical time because, if the babies are born at this stage and are well nourished, they have a very good chance of healthy survival.

After 24 weeks of pregnancy the growth rate of multiples is progressively slower depending on how many babies are present. The average birthweight for twins is 2500 grams (5 1/2 lbs) which is some 800 grams (2 lbs) less than for single babies. It is not at all uncommon for the babies to be of different weights, and perhaps surprisingly, monozygotic twins are
more likely to have a greater weight discrepancy than dizygotic twins.

There are many animal and bird species where it is perfectly normal and natural for the mother to nurture many babies at the same time. It is not however easy for a human parent to relate equally to two babies at the same time. Some parents feel disappointed and even guilty to find how difficult this can prove. It is not uncommon to find one baby more attractive than the other. For instance, if they are of different sizes, the mother will often feel prouder of and closer to the larger baby.

However the greatest difficulty may arise when the babies have very different personalities. If one twin is contented, feeds well, enjoys being cuddled and does not cry when left on her own, it is almost inevitable that the mother will find this baby more attractive than one who, when offered a feed, fights and resists and continues to cry when put down. Inevitably, this baby will take up much more time than her placid twin and the mother may well feel resentment.

It is important to emphasise that this situation is not uncommon and that it usually works itself out over the first few months. The difficult baby may well later become a particularly bright and attractive child.

**FEEDING**

Mothers will inevitably give a lot of thought about how they will feed their babies, not only from a nutritional point of view but also because this activity will take up a great deal of the first six months! Each couple will decide for themselves which is the most appropriate method for them but no one should be discouraged from breastfeeding. It is not only
possible to breastfeed twins, but once established it can also be very satisfactory and rewarding; many sets of twins have been entirely breastfed, some to beyond their first birthday. Very few sets of triplets are entirely breastfed but many are happy with a combination of breast and bottle milk.

The advantages of breastfeeding are the same as for single babies. In addition it is cheaper and it is the only way that both babies can be nursed and fed at the same time, which can be very emotionally rewarding. As all mothers of twins complain that there is not enough time for cuddling, this is a considerable advantage. The main advantage of bottlefeeding, of course, is that someone else can help.

There are many techniques for breastfeeding twins and the best way to learn about these is to talk to another mother who has breastfed them. Better still, visit one who is feeding at the moment. A local Twins Club will almost certainly be able to find a willing candidate.

Some Positions for Breastfeeding Twins
TRANSPORT
The problem of transporting the babies must be solved or the mother may become very isolated at home. There are many types of suitable prams and pushchairs and it is wise to take advice from other mothers of twins before spending a lot of money. Local Twins Clubs often have good quality secondhand equipment for sale.

DEVELOPMENT OF TWINS
In most respects twins do as well as singletons. The one area where they tend to fall behind is language. There are several reasons for this. The mother often has to talk in a threesome and therefore has less one to one communication with each child than she would with a singleton. Inevitably she is also much busier than she would otherwise be and tends to leave the children talking to each other instead of talking to them herself. Thus, the main model for a twin’s speech (unlike a single baby who has his mother or carer) is the other twin - someone who talks as badly as he does. When one child speaks a word incorrectly, the other often copies it and, furthermore, also reinforces the mistake in the first twin. In this way the so-called “secret language” of twins may develop. It is very rare for this to be the only language twins use and it is not harmful as long as normal language is developing alongside it. It is therefore essential that each twin should be spoken to individually as much as possible.

IDENTITY AND INDIVIDUALITY
Parents always plan to treat their children as individuals and to think of them as such. Unfortunately, they often forget that other people will find it hard to do the same if they are unable to tell the children apart. All small children must learn about themselves and who they are. It is, for example, bound to be confusing for twin boys if when each looks in the mirror, he is unable to distinguish between himself and his brother.

Once children get used to being dressed alike it may be hard to break the pattern. It is therefore best to dress twins differently, if only sometimes, right from the start. Dressing in the same style but different colours seems to be a good compromise. This can be started in the maternity unit with different coloured cot covers or toys so that each baby can be called by his name.
NAMING
Some parents are tempted to call their children by twin names such as June and Jane or Tim and Tom. Multiple children have a harder than usual time establishing their own identity and their individual desires and needs. They do not therefore always like to be thought of as twins and they often come to resent these twin labels later on. Even the same initial can be annoying at school, let alone for a teenager receiving personal letters!

OPPORTUNITY
It is vital that twin children should be allowed individual hobbies, excursions and other experiences wherever possible. It is an energetic mother of twins who holds two separate birthday parties but at least each child should have his own birthday cake and card. From an early age the children should spend time apart. Grandparents and friends often prefer to have one baby or child at a time and a mother will enjoy having special time alone with the other child.

Inevitably it is difficult to give twins the range of opportunity that a single child has. Pastry making with one child can be a happy experience but with two it can often be chaos. However twins must not be deprived of opportunities essential to their stimulation and development. For instance, they must, like single children, learn to feed and dress themselves even if this often takes more time and causes more mess.

BROTHERS AND SISTERS
The elder brother or sister of twins may find their arrival very difficult. Inevitably the mother will be exceptionally busy caring for the new babies but more serious is the disproportionate amount of attention bestowed on the twins by other people. The older child may easily feel rejected and isolated. An older sister, for example, may see her parents as one pair, the twins as another pair and herself as on her own. It can be very helpful to find someone like a godparent or a reliable teenager who will give extra, compensating, attention to this child.
TRIPLETS AND HIGHER ORDER BIRTHS

Most of what is written here is just as relevant to families with triplets, quadruplets and even sextuplets as it is to those with twins. Inevitably some of the problems will be greater and it is essential that these families receive good practical help and professional support. The incidence of triplets rose rapidly in most developed countries from the mid 1980s, mainly due to treatments for infertility. The number is now declining. In the UK in 2010, 186 sets of triplets were born compared with 323 in 1998.

It is not unusual for an expectant mother of twins to know of other families with twins. However, this is rarely the case for a mother expecting triplets or quads. This can lead to a feeling of bewilderment, panic and loneliness. It is of great benefit to seek out other families with higher multiples during pregnancy in order to find a feeling of reality and normality about the impending event! After the babies are born, parents can find they are treated like a circus turn with complete strangers asking remarkably intimate questions about the babies and their means of conception.

**Triplet Rate: England and Wales 1955 - 2010**

Rates per 1,000 maternities

The sheer number of nappies, clothes and equipment to be accumulated is worth thinking about early. Friends, secondhand shops and twins clubs are all good sources of loans and bargains. Some baby food companies may be open to negotiation on prices for bulk buying, as may local chemists and nursery equipment retailers. It is worth approaching these as early after diagnosis as possible, because time may be very limited in mid to late pregnancy, especially if early admission to hospital becomes necessary. After the arrival of the babies, time will be non-existent! Home delivery of food, milk and nappies free of charge can sometimes also be arranged. Any reduction in shopping trips will be welcome.

Lack of sleep is every new parent’s main complaint. With triplets or more, two hands are never enough. Help during the night feeds will cut feeding times significantly. In addition, forward planning to allocate time to catch up on lost sleep can be invaluable.
THE MULTIPLE BIRTHS FOUNDATION
The Multiple Births Foundation (MBF) is a professional organisation which provides specialist support to families with twins and more, as well as training, information and advice for professionals. The MBF runs Evening Meetings regularly in London covering various aspects of the care and development of twins, triplets and more. Please contact the MBF offices for an information pack.

OTHER SOURCES OF HELP
All families with twins or more deserve special help during the early months and, for triplets, the early years. If family or friends are available to give support, then it is a good idea to organise a rota during the antenatal period. This should make life much easier once the babies have arrived. Triplet parents in particular will appreciate every extra pair of hands they can recruit.

If there is no grandparent or other relation or friend available on a regular basis, then other sources of help should be explored as soon as possible after a multiple pregnancy is diagnosed. It is always better to plan to have help and cancel if it is not needed than to have to search it out in an emergency.

A health visitor or social worker may be able to arrange a home help or some other help from one of the official or voluntary services. Students from Nursery Nurse Colleges are often available for a few half days a week. A reliable college or school student may also be a great help. Some voluntary organisations, such as Home Start, may be able to provide a volunteer befriender.

Members of a local Twins Club can provide advice and support during pregnancy as well as being a useful source of secondhand equipment. The Twins and Multiple Births Association (Tamba) is the umbrella organisation for the twins clubs in the UK and coordinates support groups for triplets, bereavement, one parent families and special needs. It also publishes much useful literature.

The Tamba Twinline is another excellent source of parent to parent support which operates in mornings and evenings all year round.
USEFUL ADDRESSES

For more information and publications contact:

The Multiple Births Foundation
Hammersmith House - Level 4
Queen Charlotte’s and Chelsea Hospital
Du Cane Road
London
W12 0HS
Tel: 020 3313 3519
Email: mbf@imperial.nhs.uk
Web: www.multiplebirths.org.uk

Twins and Multiple Births
Association (Tamba)
Parent to parent support through
local Twins Clubs
Telephone: 01483 304442
Email: enquiries@tamba.org.uk
Web: www.tamba.org.uk

Tamba Twinline
A national, confidential, listening and
emotional support service for all parents
of twins, triplets and more
Tel: 0800 138 0509

Home-Start UK
A volunteer parent befriending service
for families with children under 5 in
their own home
Tel: 0116 258 7900
Email: info@home-start.org.uk
Web: www.home-start.org.uk

Twins Clubs
Listings of regional twins clubs
www.twinsclub.co.uk
www.twinsonline.org.uk
www.twinsuk.co.uk

Family Information Service (FIS)
Website providing details of local family
information services. Each FIS can
provide lists of mum and baby/toddler
groups and all Ofsted registered childcare
providers in the area.
www.familyinformationservices.org.uk

Maternity Nanny Training (MNT)
Tel: 0844 826 8446
Email: info@mnttraining.co.uk
Web: www.mnttraining.co.uk

Children’s Centres
Website providing details of local
Children’s Centres. Sure Start Children’s
Centres can provide groups, early
learning and full daycare for children
under five, they are open to all parents
and children and many of their services
are free.
http://childrenscentresfinder.direct.gov.uk

Best Bear
Website listing childcare agencies in
the UK
www.bestbear.co.uk