



## Weighty future in store for pre-term babies

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Wayne Cutfield, Professor of Paediatric Endocrinology at the Liggins Institute, Auckland, told attendees at the Developmental Origins of Health and Disease (DOHaD) conference in Adelaide that: 'Research reveals that babies born before 32 weeks are at an increased risk of developing metabolic disease in later life.'

'Furthermore, adults who were born preterm tend to have children who are more likely to be overweight, suggesting the effects of prematurity may extend to the next generation as well,' he added.

'We are trying to understand what the triggers and mechanisms are that lead to these long-term changes in the health of babies born preterm. A likely contributing factor are differences in the gut bacteria of preterm children. Studies have shown that gut bacteria can influence the risk of obesity and diabetes.'

Professor Cutfield noted that pre-term babies have different gut bacteria than those who are born at full-term and it appears that these differences are also present in late childhood.

Professor Cutfield's research includes multiple studies involving first born children, as well as pre-term and overdue children, and explores the relationship between early life events and later risk factors for obesity, diabetes and heart disease.

'Our health and well-being in utero influences our health lifelong. It is a special time in which we were all vulnerable. Fetal health is delicately poised and when there are shifts away from an optimal fetal environment there are increasing risks of later diseases such as diabetes and heart disease,' he said.

'The health, well-being and care of expectant mothers and fathers, and for mothers throughout pregnancy, are paramount. While the gestational period is largely controlled by our genes, we know that when equipped with the right knowledge and support, expectant parents can take positive steps to optimise their pregnancy and the long-term health outcomes for their child.

'The first 1,000 days of a child's life, those being the months leading up to conception, throughout pregnancy and into toddlerhood, is a critical period for establishing the child's long-term health and we strongly encourage parents to invest in it.

Positive lifestyle choices before and during pregnancy around a healthy balanced diet consisting of plenty of leafy greens, limiting alcohol consumption, moderate exercise and sensible maternal weight gain can have a profound impact on the health prospects of the child, he said.

'The message is simple – modify the early care of children and improve their chances of a healthier life.'

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