

Premature birth and flying

Most pregnancies last 38 to 42 weeks, but some babies are born early. The number of weeks a pregnancy lasts is called the gestation or gestational age. After birth, we add the baby's age in days to give the corrected gestation. For example, a baby born at 25 weeks and 3 days is described as 25+3 weeks. At three days old, they would be 25+6 corrected gestation, sometimes written as 25+6/40.

Babies born at the expected time are called term. Preterm means the same as premature. When a premature baby reaches their original due date, they are described as term corrected.

Premature and sick babies are cared for by neonatologists and specialist neonatal nurses, often alongside dietitians, speech therapists, and physiotherapists. In some countries, respiratory therapists manage breathing support, but in the UK and Europe this is usually done by doctors. Care takes place in a Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) or Special Care Baby Unit (SCBU).

Premature babies are grouped by gestational age, which helps guide likely risks and treatments. These are general guides rather than strict rules. Some babies may seem more or less mature than their gestational age suggests, and those with complex conditions may need extra support. As they grow and improve, they move on to the next stage of care.

When will my child be ready to fly back to the UK?

In collaboration with yourselves, we will find the right time to bring your family back home to the UK. This can be from the first two weeks of life, ideally when your baby is stable, with good blood test, x-ray and scan results, and no need for frequent treatment changes.

Your baby's safety will always be the priority, but your family's situation will also be considered when deciding the right time to return to the UK. Life abroad may be very difficult; a parent may need to return to work, and there may be other children to think about. A planned flight back to NHS care may also help limit costs compared with ongoing medical fees overseas.



How will my child be taken to the UK?

There are various options for travel; the best option will depend on your child's condition. Cost is also considered.

Usually, at least one parent can fly with their child. As long as your child is doing well, you will be able to sit next to them, talk to them and touch them. Parents often like to take photos to share with family and friends. Having your own private plane for the day is pretty rare!



Private Air Ambulance - A private air ambulance is a small, specially equipped aircraft that functions as a flying intensive care unit. It carries an incubator, ventilator and other essential medical equipment, with a neonatal medical team. This option is suitable for the smallest and sickest babies, but can be expensive, particularly over long distances. It may also be the best choice even for a stable baby, helping to avoid the risk of delays or cancellations with commercial flights.



Commercial Medical Escort - Most airlines will allow a baby to travel in a carry-cot (bassinet) provided by the airline if there is a nurse or doctor taking responsibility for their care. This is suitable for babies who do not need an incubator but may need support with their breathing at altitude. This is a very cost-effective option for longer distances. Lia's Wings will make the assessment as to whether your baby is fit to travel in this way.



What are the risks of a medical flight?

The risks of a medical flight can be thought of in terms of the flight itself, things that could affect the baby during the flight, and how the flight might affect the baby afterwards.

Risks of the flight

When anybody travels in an aeroplane, there is always a degree of risk, just like travelling in a car or even walking down the street carries risk. Specifically for air travel, this includes:

- Delays and cancellations that mean you have to wait for another time or day to fly
- Loss of cabin pressure requiring oxygen masks for passengers
- Problems with the plane leading to an emergency landing
- Ditching, which means an emergency landing in water

Risks during the flight

- At high altitude, the air is less dense, so some children may need more oxygen
- When the air is less dense, air inside the body can expand and cause pain
- Noise, vibration and acceleration can cause stress to a baby
- Unexpected deterioration requiring emergency medical treatment

We do our best to minimise all risks and ensure your baby's aeromedical transfer is as safe and comfortable as possible. We can answer any questions you may have to put your mind at ease.

