

# Decreased Fetal Movements

**Red Nose recommends being aware of your baby's movements and contacting your health professional immediately if something changes**

- An active unborn baby is a healthy unborn baby – babies do not slow down as your pregnancy progresses.
- Babies will usually move around regularly right up until and including during labour.
- Research tells us that around half of all women who had a stillbirth noticed their baby's movements had slowed down or stopped.
- Contact your healthcare provider as soon as you notice a change in your baby's movements – NEVER wait until the next day.
- Get to know the pattern, type and strength of your baby's movements – that way you will be able to tell if something changes.
- Normal baby movements feel like a kick, a swish or a roll.

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**Red Nose recommends understanding your unborn baby's natural pattern of movement and if you suspect any change, contact your midwife, obstetrician or hospital on the day you are worried about your baby's movements – never wait until the next day.**

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## Stillbirth

Stillbirth is the tragic loss of a baby born after 20 weeks gestational age (or weighing greater than 400grams at birth if gestational age is unknown).

Around 1 in every 130 pregnancies in Australia tragically ends in stillbirth – that is six babies each day dying suddenly before they have even had a chance to take their first breath.

The major causes of stillbirth in Australia are congenital abnormality, perinatal conditions and maternal conditions. Tragically around 20% of stillbirths have no explanation, and almost half of unexplained stillbirths occur near full-term<sup>1</sup>. This lack of diagnosis or cause can add to grieving parents' distress, as they struggle to understand what went wrong and are left wondering if it will happen again in a subsequent pregnancy.

## Normal Fetal Movements

Fetal movements are a key indicator of fetal health and maternal perception of these has long been used as an indicator of fetal well being<sup>3</sup>. As the baby grows and matures in utero, the quality and timing of the movements reflects their neurological development and maturation, forming a pattern.<sup>4-5</sup>

Regardless of the position of the placenta, it is quite common for nulliparous women (first pregnancy) to feel their unborn baby move between 18-20 weeks of pregnancy. Multiparous women (have had at least one previous pregnancy) have felt fetal movements as early as 16 weeks.<sup>6</sup>

Fetal movements steadily increase in strength and organisation throughout pregnancy, becoming more structured as the pregnancy progresses. The movements incorporate sleep/wake cycles of 20-40-minute duration throughout the day and night.<sup>7</sup>

Every woman experiences fetal movements differently, describing them from kicks to flutters or from swishes to rolls.<sup>8</sup> Pregnant women have said fetal movements have felt different from one pregnancy to another, and women pregnant with twins have noticed a distinct difference between the babies' movements. Given this variety of maternal perception of fetal movement, it is not possible to agree on a correct number of kicks to indicate a healthy pregnancy. Pregnant women are therefore discouraged from relying on an exact number of kicks as an accurate method of fetal well-being – this is why understanding your baby's own unique movements is important to helping you to recognise any changes.

## Reasons for Change in Fetal Movement

Decreases in fetal movement during pregnancy could be due to a number of factors. Your baby will move while they are asleep, which is normal. However, there are several medical reasons for a change or reduction in movement that could indicate a problem.

Fetal movements may decrease because of fetal growth restriction (stemming from problems with the functioning of the placenta), fetal compromise, oligohydramnios (amniotic fluid volume that is less than expected for gestational age), polyhydramnios (amniotic fluid volume that is more than expected for gestational age), the use of maternal medications, illicit drugs or sedatives, or smoking.<sup>7</sup>

Reduced fetal movements are often a pre-cursor to adverse perinatal outcomes including stillbirth, intrauterine fetal growth restriction or premature birth.

As research has shown that stillbirth and other adverse perinatal outcomes are often preceded by maternal perception of decreased fetal movement (DFM)<sup>9</sup>, it is recommended that women who experience decreased fetal movements notify their health care provider as soon as possible to help ensure that their concerns are managed and any investigations required are performed in a timely way.

## Conclusion

Most women report being able to feel their baby move between 16 and 24 weeks of pregnancy.

There is no set number of movements so counting kicks is not encouraged.

Get to know the pattern, type and strength of movements that is unique to your baby.

Research tells us that around half of all women who had a stillbirth noticed their baby's movements had slowed down or stopped.

Healthy babies move regularly right up until and during labour and a change in movements could be a sign that your baby is unwell.

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**Red Nose recommends understanding your baby's natural pattern of movement and if you notice any changes, contact your midwife, obstetrician or hospital on the day that you are worried about your baby's movements – never wait until the next day.**

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## Further Information and Resources about Stillbirth Prevention

Red Nose is proud to partner with the NHMRC Stillbirth Centre for Research Excellence in the National Safer Baby Bundle Initiative.

Stillbirth Centre for Research Excellence:  
<https://www.stillbirthcre.org.au/safer-baby-bundle/>

Safer baby resources for women and healthcare settings:  
<https://saferbaby.org.au>

Safer baby bundle sleep position resources and position statement: <https://www.stillbirthcre.org.au/safer-baby-bundle/raising-awareness-and-improving-care-for-women-with-decreased-fetal-movements/>

## State/Territory Health Department Safer Baby Information

New South Wales: <http://cec.health.nsw.gov.au/keep-patients-safe/maternity-safety-program/safer-baby-bundle>

Victoria: <https://www.bettersafecare.vic.gov.au/our-work/clinical-improvement-and-innovation/reducing-stillbirth>

Queensland: <https://clinicalexcellence.qld.gov.au/priority-areas/safety-and-quality/safer-baby-bundle>

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