

PRESS RELEASE

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Finding a way to persuade the hurried child to make the world wait, just a little bit longer

An early start can be an advantage in so many things, but not in life. Despite dramatic improvements in the survival of premature babies – some now being nursed to health after barely 24 weeks in the womb – those who push their way into the world too early face many hurdles.

Breathing problems, brain hemorrhages, gut disorders, and difficulty fighting infection are commonplace in babies born before 32 weeks gestation. They are also 40 times more likely to have cerebral palsy than babies born at full term.

As part of a world-first trial, a drug commonly used to treat arthritis, rofecoxib, is to be tested on pregnant Australian women who go into early labour in the hope of delaying the birth and improving the long-term health prospects of their babies.

In the trial of 1000 pregnant women, half will be given rofecoxib in addition to the current standard treatment. The trial will involve women who go into labour at 22 to 28 weeks' gestation.

Shaun Brennecke, a professor of obstetrics and gynaecology at the Royal Women's Hospital, one of the centres taking part in the trial, said the key to arresting early labour was to inhibit hormones called prostaglandins. These hormones, responsible for pain, swelling and heat of arthritis, also cause contractions in a pregnant uterus.

