

# Growth in Infants Born Small for Gestational Age (SGA): A Guide for Families

## What does small for gestational age (SGA) mean?

The term “small for gestational age” (SGA) refers to any child who was born significantly smaller than normal for gestational age. The term is most commonly applied to children whose length or weight at birth, when plotted on a growth chart in the pediatrician’s office, is less than the 5th percentile, which means that less than 5 children out of every hundred fall in this category, or less than the 3rd percentile, which means that less than 3 children out of every hundred fall in that category.

## How to understand the growth chart?

The growth chart uses lines to display an average growth path for a child of a certain age, gender, and length. Each line indicates a certain percentage of the population that would be that particular length or weight at a particular age. A boy with a length that is plotted on the 25th percentile line, for example, indicates that approximately 25 out of 100 boys his age are shorter than him. Children often do not follow these lines exactly but are expected to have growth plots that are roughly parallel to these lines. A child who has a length plot that is below the 3rd percentile line at birth (some use the 5th percentile line as a cutoff) is considered to be small for age.

## What does being born SGA mean for my child’s growth in the future?

Although most children who are born SGA grow and gain weight well, some children do not. In general, children usually grow well enough for their length and/or weight to reach a normal point on the growth curve by two years of age. Children who do not reach a normal length by age two may be short as adults.

## What causes babies to be born SGA?

Usually, the reason is not known. When it is known, another term, intrauterine growth restriction (IUGR), is often used. This means that the baby did not grow well while in the mother’s womb. Some of the known risk factors for babies being born SGA or with IUGR include:

- Maternal smoking
- Poor nutrition
- Preeclampsia or eclampsia
- Placenta problems
- Multiple pregnancy (such as twins)
- Genetic problems
- Infections during pregnancy, such as rubella, toxoplasmosis, cytomegalovirus, or syphilis
- Maternal alcohol or drug abuse

## What tests might be used to assess my child?

The best “test” is to monitor the growth over time using your child’s growth chart. The time frame is typically 2-6 months, depending on the age of the child. Babies who are born SGA or with IUGR often grow well and do not usually need any special tests or treatments to help them grow. If there is a growth concern, then the doctor may obtain your child’s bone age (x-ray of left hand/wrist) or do blood tests to look for problems that could be affecting growth.

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