



Media Release
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For immediate release

Community-focused Science to Help Families Predict and Prevent Preterm Birth

Largest project of its kind in Canada launches in Calgary

Alberta has reached such a critical point in preterm births that more than 40 scientists and clinical researchers have launched an unprecedented initiative to find tangible solutions for families. Funded by \$5 million in community donations through the Alberta Children's Hospital Foundation and Calgary Health Foundation, the team aims to increase global knowledge and provide immediate real world health benefits to expectant mothers and newborn babies in our community.

"At nine percent, our province has one of the highest preterm birth rates in the country," says Dr. Donna Slater, child health and wellness researcher from the Alberta Children's Hospital Research Institute at the University of Calgary. "That means babies in our province are at higher risk of complications that contribute to impaired brain development, physical disability and neonatal death. For babies who survive, the effects of preterm birth can last a lifetime and change the entire course of their future."

Recognizing the urgent need to address this serious health risk for families, the Alberta Children's Hospital Foundation and Calgary Health Foundation have joined forces in rallying the community to help fund this initiative as quickly as possible. This research investment is part of the Calgary Health Foundation's Newborns Need campaign – a \$152 million commitment to advance maternal and newborn care in southern Alberta.

[A full press kit is available here](#)

Press kit features: B-roll of the current Foothills Medical Centre Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU), b-roll of the research lab, images from the Wilding family and images of the research team leading the initiative in Calgary.

"Calgary is uniquely positioned to provide crucial leadership in reducing the risks, incidence and long-term effects of preterm birth for families here and around the world," says Saifa Koonar, President and CEO of the Alberta Children's Hospital Foundation. "We are grateful that years of generous community support have helped our city build a critical mass of internationally acclaimed leaders in the field ready to solve this issue for families."

"This initiative is bringing together local biomedical scientists, doctors, nurses, psychologists, imaging specialists and epidemiologists to give every newborn a fighting chance," says Mike Meldrum, President and CEO of the Calgary Health Foundation. "With experts collaborating from the lab to the clinic and into our community, southern Alberta families will become the first to benefit from breakthroughs in preterm birth interventions."

In the first phase of the initiative now underway, scientists are working in the lab to develop a blood test for rapid diagnosis. They will also use the power of advanced machine learning to generate personalized risk scores for pregnant women, enabling health care professionals to anticipate preterm births and provide care strategies tailored for individual families.

“By developing simple, cost-effective tools that families can access in the community, we have the potential to significantly shift care delivery and services for expectant mothers,” says Dr. Slater. “Ultimately, we want to help more moms extend their pregnancies and welcome healthier babies into their families.”

Molly and Patrick Wilding, parents of micro-preemie, Gianna, born in January 2020 at 23 weeks and six days gestation, are grateful to donors for investing in preterm birth prevention and enhanced neonatal intensive care. “Gianna’s unexpected, early birth was a complete shock to us. I was a healthy woman with no known warning signs during pregnancy, why was this happening?”, Molly explains. “This important research will help to identify families, like ours, who are at risk for preterm births, allowing for earlier interventions and better outcomes.”

FAST FACTS

Who? A team of University of Calgary scientists and care providers will be inviting 4,000 expectant mothers from Calgary and southern Alberta to participate in research that will take place throughout their pregnancy and up to one year after they have delivered their babies. Fathers and partners will also be encouraged to take part.

Why? Of the more than 17,250 babies born in Calgary each year, about 1,550 are born preterm. Over 1,200 of those preterm infants require specialized care within a NICU. In addition to the strain on families, the estimated annual health care costs associated with caring for preterm infants in Canada is \$587.1 million.

What? The study will analyze biological samples, questionnaires about moms and their infants, and reviews of their medical records at predetermined time points.

When? Researchers have begun the first phase of their work and plan to enroll a larger number of participants as early as this summer.

Where? The study will be offered through Alberta Health Services (AHS) Calgary ultrasound clinics, outpatient obstetric clinics, obstetrical triage and general advertising in the community.

*The **Alberta Children’s Hospital Foundation** inspires our community to invest in excellence in child health, research and family centred care. Together, we can create the best health and best future for all children and families.*
childrenshospital.ab.ca.

*The **Calgary Health Foundation** is a philanthropic organization uniting our donors, four hospitals, care providers, and community partners with the ambitious aim of revolutionizing health outcomes. Through deep cooperation, unrelenting persistence and a sharp focus on care, wellness and research, we are unyielding in our efforts to ensure Calgarians receive the most progressive care in the world — because our loved ones and yours deserve nothing less.*
calgaryhealthfoundation.ca

Child Health and Wellness The University of Calgary is driving science and innovation to transform the health and well-being of children and families. Led by the [Alberta Children’s Hospital Research Institute](#), top scientists across campus are partnering with Alberta Health Services, the Alberta Children’s Hospital Foundation, and our community to create a better future for children through research.

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