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A major All-Ireland research programme to identify fetuses that are not growing properly in an effort to reduce the number of stillbirths will begin in April. The project will assess more than 50,000 pregnancies in eight hospitals during the next five years. It will focus on the 3 per cent of pregnancies where the fetus does not grow properly.

Prof. Fergal Malone, Head of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland and Rotunda Hospital, is the principal investigator on the study and says the causes of stillbirth have not yet received significant research attention.

"There are five to eight stillbirths per thousand but no one really knows how many of these deaths are preventable or are the results of not developing properly. More than 10 per cent of all pregnancies measure on the low side in terms of weight and for about 3 per cent that is because the baby is not growing very well. What we are hoping to achieve is an improvement in our diagnoses of fetuses that are not growing well and figure out when is the best time to intervene if needs be." he says.

Even when they go full term, some low-weight pregnancies can lead to difficulties in later life, including mental retardation. The researchers hope to investigate any link between low weight pregnancies and later mental retardation and the research teams will follow the development of the infants in the research group for three years. "We plan to follow the babies from low-weight pregnancies for a couple of years because you can't really tell whether a child has mental retardation at birth" says Malone.

Dedicated ultrasound machines have been provided at each of the eight hospital sites as part of a €4 million funding provision from the Health Research Board.