

# Virginia Apgar Biography

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# Contents

<a href="#">Virginia Apgar Biography.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Biography.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>

# Biography

Apgar was an American pediatrician who created a scale for assessing newborn infant health. She graduated from Mount Holyoke College in 1929 and earned her M.D. degree from the College of Physicians and Surgeons at Columbia University in 1933. Although she spent her first two years in a surgical internship, Dr. Apgar elected to enter the growing field of anesthesiology. In 1949 she was appointed the first full professor of anesthesiology at Columbia. That same year, after building the department and training program, Dr. Apgar gave up her administrative duties as head of the anesthesiology department and turned to the study of anesthesia and its role in childbirth, assisting in the births of more than 17,000 infants during her career at Columbia.

Apgar published a system for the assessment of newborn health status in 1953. The scoring system that bears her name employs a ten point score based on two points each for healthy heart rate, respiration, muscle tone, reflexes, and color. Typically assessed at one and five minutes after birth, a low Apgar score serves as a quantified signal for further attention or evaluation. For over 40 years the Apgar score has remained the standard method of newborn assessment, prompting one physician to remark, "Every baby born in a modern hospital anywhere in the world is looked at first through the eyes of Virginia Apgar."

During a sabbatical year in 1959, Apgar received a master's degree in public health from Johns Hopkins University. Rather than returning to academic medicine, however, she began working with the National Foundation March of Dimes and devoted the remainder of her life to the prevention of birth defects through public education and fund raising for research. She continued to lecture in the area of birth defects at Cornell University Medical College and Johns Hopkins School of Public Health. She received many honors and awards for her work, including the Gold Medal for Distinguished Achievement in Medicine from the Columbia College of Physicians and Surgeons' Alumni Association, the first woman to be so honored. She published a popular book for parents with Joan Beck in 1972 entitled *Is My Baby Alright*"