

Preterm birth contributes to growing number of infant deaths

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Babies born too soon and too small accounted for a growing proportion of infant deaths, according to new statistics released today from the National Center for Health Statistics, (NCHS).

Babies who died of preterm-related causes accounted for 36.5 percent of infant deaths in 2005, up from 34.6 percent in 2000, according to "Infant Mortality Statistics from the 2005 Period Linked Birth/Infant Death Data Set," Vol. 57, No. 2, of the National Vital Statistics Report, released today by the NCHS.

The nation's infant mortality rate inched up slightly in 2005 to 6.9, from 6.8 percent in 2004, although the change is not statistically significant, according to the report. While the infant mortality rate dropped more than 9 percent between 1995 and 2005, the changes since 2000 have not been statistically significant.

"Essentially, there has been no improvement in the infant death rate since 2000, and the increase in the proportion of infants who die from preterm-related causes is troubling," said Joann Petrini, Ph.D., director of the March of Dimes Perinatal Data Center. "Preventing preterm birth is crucial to reducing the nation's infant mortality rate and giving every baby a healthy start in life."

More than a half million babies are born premature (less than 37 weeks gestation) each year and those who survive face the risk of life long health consequences, such as breathing and feeding problems, cerebral

palsy, and learning problems.

Mortality rates for infants born even a few weeks early, or "late preterm" (between 34⁷₇ weeks of gestation) were three times those for full-term infants.

The NCHS report found that the mortality rate for very low birthweight infants (those weighing less than 1,500 grams or three and a third pounds) has not changed since 2000, despite rapid improvement between 1983 and 2000. The mortality rate for this group of infants was more than 100 times the rate for normal birthweights infants (at or more than 2,500 grams or five and half pounds).

Low birthweight and preterm birth are leading causes of infant mortality and the rates of both have increased steadily since the mid-1980s. The rise in multiple births from the increased use of assisted reproductive technology and increases in cesarean sections and inductions of labor for preterm infants have contributed to this increase.

Source: March of Dimes Foundation

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