

Federal report finds early births decline in most categories

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For the first time in three decades, the nation - and most states - saw a two-year decline in preterm birth rates, indicating that strategies implemented over the past seven years have begun to pay off, according to the March of Dimes.

"In 2003, we began a national campaign to reduce the terrible toll of [premature birth](#) because every baby deserves a healthy start in life," said Dr. Jennifer L. Howse, president of the March of Dimes. "In every state, our volunteers are working with policy makers to improve the quality of perinatal care, and determine best practices for reducing preterm birth. We are thrilled with this sign of sustained progress."

This week, March of Dimes Medical Director Alan Fleischman, MD, will testify about preterm birth and [infant mortality](#) before the Health Subcommittee of the House Energy and Commerce Committee. At the May 12 hearing, he will discuss preterm birth's effects on child health and development; interventions to stop unnecessary c-sections and early inductions and other recommendations for reducing preterm birth. Dr. Fleischman also will urge Congress to reauthorize the PREEMIE Act (P.L. 109-450), which supports expanded research, education and other projects to help reduce preterm birth rates.

Despite the improvement, each year in the United States, more than half a million infants are born too soon. Preterm birth, (birth before 37 weeks gestation), is a serious health problem that costs the United States more than \$26 billion annually. It is a leading cause of infant death, and babies

who survive an early birth often face the risk of lifetime health challenges, including breathing problems, cerebral palsy, mental retardation and others.

Nationally, the preterm birth rate declined four percent between 2006 and 2008 from 12.8 to 12.3 percent of live births, according to the report: "Are Preterm Births on the Decline in the United States? Recent Data From the National Vital Statistics System," by Joyce Martin et al., released today by the National Center for Health Statistics, (NCHS).

Preterm birth rates are down in 35 states. Rates declined for both late preterm (34 to 36 weeks gestation) and early preterm births (before 34 weeks gestation). Rates also declined among the major racial and ethnic groups, for mothers under the age of 40, and regardless of the method of delivery, according to the NCHS report.

The NCHS report pointed out that between 2006 and 2008 the preterm birth rate declined five percent among both non-Hispanic white and non-Hispanic black mothers. Hispanic mothers also experienced a slight decline over the two-year period.

Also, preterm birth rates declined four percent for babies delivered by a cesarean section. Among vaginal deliveries, [preterm birth](#) rates declined regardless of whether or not labor was induced, although there was a larger decline in induced vaginal deliveries.

Provided by March of Dimes Foundation

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