

# Preterm birth rates improve in most states

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The United States received a “D” on the March of Dimes Premature Birth Report Card, when national preterm birth rates are measured against the Healthy People 2010 goals. The United States has a high rate of preterm birth compared to top scoring states and, notably, most industrialized countries. Eight states earned a better grade on the third annual report card and 32 others and the District of Columbia saw their preterm birth rates improve. Credit: March of Dimes

Eight states earned a better grade on the 2010 March of Dimes Premature Birth Report Card and 32 others and the District of Columbia saw their preterm birth rates improve.

Following three decades of increases, in 2008 the nation saw the first two-year decline in the preterm birth rate, a 4 percent drop from 2006. The 2008 preliminary preterm birth rate dropped to 12.3 percent, from the 2006 final rate of 12.8 percent. The March of Dimes says 79 percent

of the decline was among babies born just a few weeks too soon.

Overall, the United States received a "D" on the report card, when national preterm [birth rates](#) are measured against the Healthy People 2010 goals. The United States has a high rate of preterm birth compared to top scoring states and, notably, most industrialized countries.

"The policy changes and programs to prevent preterm birth that our volunteers and staff have worked so hard to bring about are starting to pay off," said Dr. Jennifer L. Howse, president of the March of Dimes. "The two-year decline we have seen nationwide, though small, are encouraging. We believe this decline is the beginning of a trend, but must be supported by better health care, new research and adoption of intervention programs to lower the risk of preterm birth."

The March of Dimes released its 2010 report card today, the 8th Annual Prematurity Awareness Day®, when the nation is asked to focus attention on the growing problem of [premature birth](#).

"As a family doctor, I've seen the terrible impact of premature birth," said U.S. Surgeon General Regina M. Benjamin, who today unveiled a new public service announcement about the serious problem of preterm birth. "It can cause life-long disabilities, and it is the leading cause of deaths in newborns.

"Our country has one of the highest rates of preterm birth in the world," Benjamin said. "We have to do better."

In the United States, more than half a million babies are born preterm each year. Preterm birth, birth before 37 weeks gestation, is a serious health problem that costs the [United States](#) more than \$26 billion annually, according to the Institute of Medicine. It is the leading cause of newborn death, and babies who survive an early birth often face the risk

of lifetime health challenges, such as breathing problems, cerebral palsy, intellectual disabilities and others. Even infants born just a few weeks early have higher rates of hospitalization and illness than full-term infants. The last few weeks of pregnancy are critical to a baby because many important organs, including the brain, are not completely developed until then.

On the 2010 report card, 17 states earned a "C," 20 received a "D," and 13 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico failed. However, most states saw improvement in at least one of the three contributing factors the March of Dimes tracks.

- 28 states and Puerto Rico reduced the percentage of women of childbearing age who smoke;
- 17 states and the District of Columbia reduced the percentage of uninsured women of childbearing age;
- 37 states and Puerto Rico lowered the late preterm birth rate, infants born between 34 and 36 weeks gestation.

There are known strategies that can lower the risk of an early birth, such as smoking cessation, preconception care, early prenatal care, progesterone treatments for women with a history of [preterm birth](#), avoiding multiples from fertility treatments and avoiding unnecessary c-sections and inductions before 39 weeks of pregnancy.

Provided by March of Dimes Foundation

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