

US preterm birth rate under 12 percent, the lowest level in nearly a decade

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The nation's preterm birth rate slipped under 12 percent for the first time in nearly a decade, the fourth consecutive year it declined, potentially sparing tens of thousands of babies the serious health consequences of an early birth.

The national [preterm birth](#) rate declined to 11.99 percent last year, according to the National Center for Health Statistics, which released its report "Births: Preliminary Data for 2010," today, the first-ever World Prematurity Day. Despite the improvement, still too many babies, one out of every eight, was born too soon.

"As our volunteers and partners across the globe gather on World Prematurity Day to honor the 13 million infants born too soon worldwide, we celebrate the news of this exciting success," said Dr. Jennifer L. Howse, president of the March of Dimes. "Four consecutive years of declines in our nation's preterm [birth rate](#) is a testament to the combined hard work of researchers, [health care professionals](#), our volunteers, sponsors, donors and others who know that there is no single answer to the problem of [premature birth](#). We are continuing to work together to prevent as many preterm births as possible because we owe our babies a healthy start in life."

Preterm birth, birth before 37 weeks gestation, is a serious health problem that costs the United States more than \$26 billion annually, according to a 2006 Institute of Medicine report. It is the leading cause of [newborn death](#), and one million babies worldwide die each year as a

result of their [early birth](#).

Babies who survive an early birth often face the risk of lifelong health challenges, such as breathing problems, cerebral palsy, learning disabilities and others. Even babies born just a few weeks early have higher rates of hospitalization and illness than full-term infants. If there are no complications that require an early delivery, at least 39 weeks of pregnancy are critical to a baby's health because many important organs, including the brain and lungs, are not completely developed until then.

Babies born just a few weeks too soon, between 34 and 36 weeks of pregnancy, accounted for most of the decline in the national preterm birth rate, according to the federal report.

The report also found that cesarean sections declined slightly. Research by the March of Dimes and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 2008 found that cesarean sections accounted for nearly all of the increase in U.S. singleton preterm birth rate between 1996 and 2004.

The decline in the 2010 preterm birth rate is a 6 percent drop from the high of 12.8 percent in 2006. Preterm birth rates declined significantly in 44 states and the District of Columbia when compared to 2006, according to the federal report.

Provided by March of Dimes Foundation

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